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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

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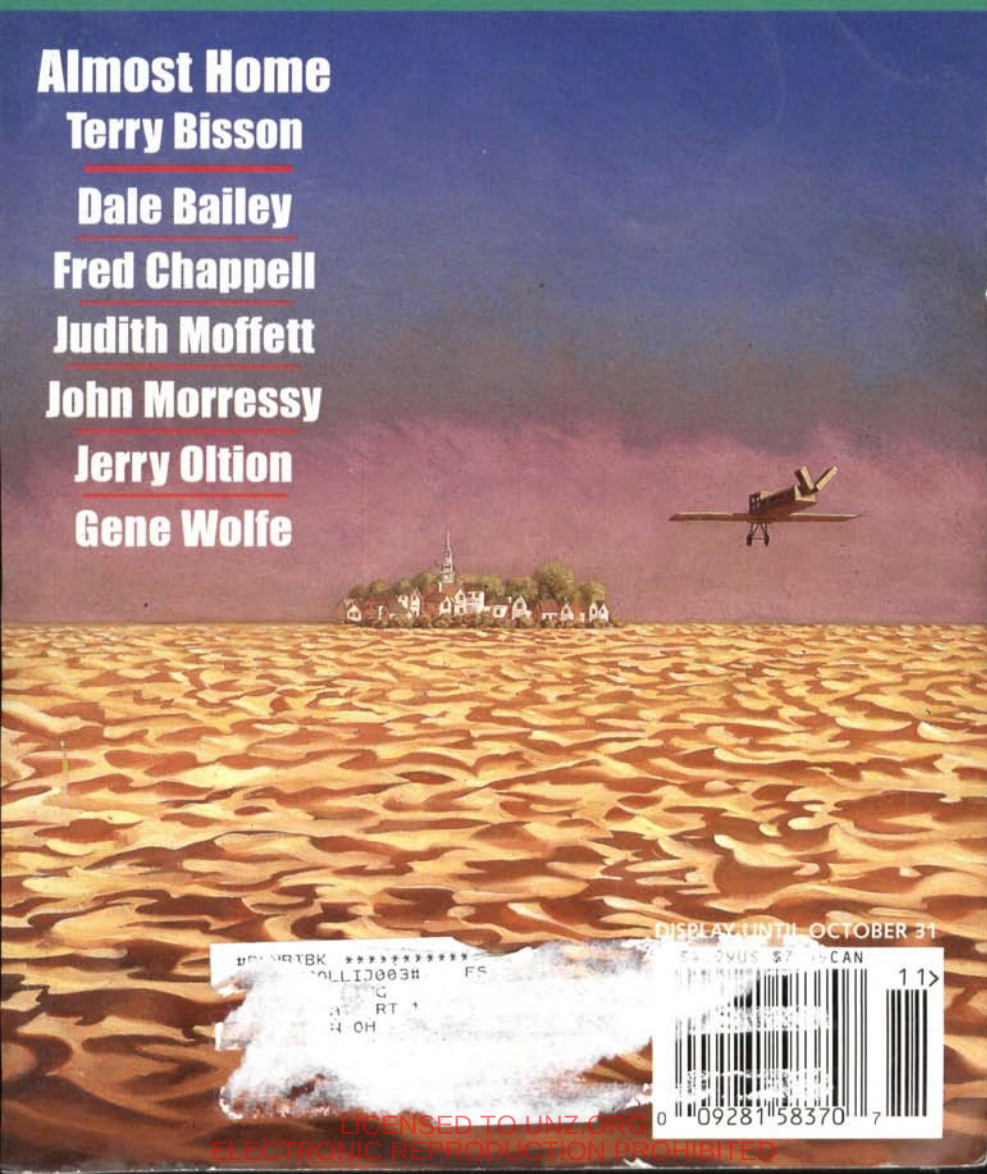

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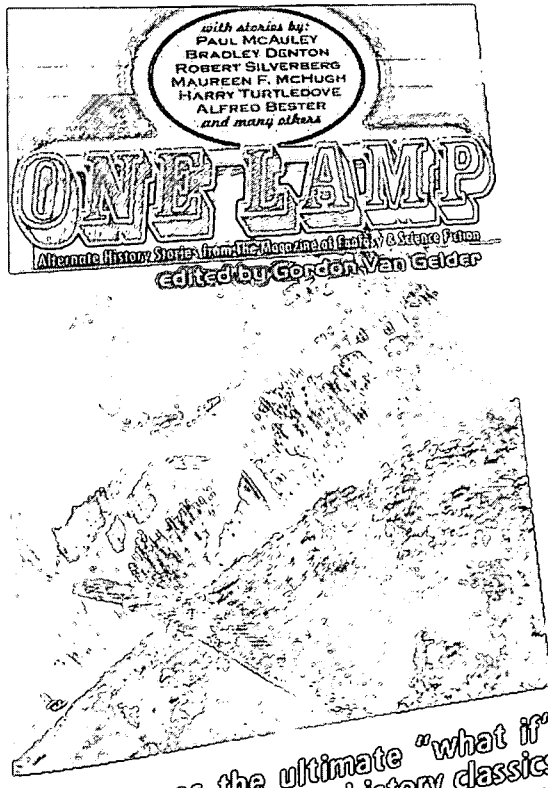

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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October/November • 55th Year of Publication

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Judith Moffett lives in Kentucky these days, where she divides her time between Lexington, where she teaches a creative writing course in science fiction at the University of Kentucky, and her hill farm in Anderson County. The winner of the first Theodore Sturgeon Award in 1987 (for her story "Surviving"), she is the author of such novels as Pennterra, The Ragged World *and* Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream *(the latter two are, like this new story, concerned with the alien Hefn). Her last appearance in our pages was with "The Bradshaw" back in 1998. Her recent work includes editing and translating* The North! To the North! Five Swedish Poets of the Nineteenth Century, *and she is presently at work on the third volume of her Hefn trilogy, in which the events of this story appear from a different POV. Ms. Moffett often writes about strong-willed characters — take a look at how much Denny Demaree risks in this story for the sake of his research.*

The Bear's Baby

By Judith Moffett

DENNY HEARD THE MUFFLED whacking of the chopper blades and the motor's deep roar, but he was underground and almost upside down, working by flashlight to detach a fuzzy bear cub from a dangerous nipple, and couldn't have dropped everything to scamper obediently back along the ridge trail right that minute even if he'd wanted to. Which, frankly, he didn't.

The cub let go, rasping a complaint. Denny backpedaled on his elbows out of the black cavern — and out of immediate range of the huge, rank, snoring heap of mother bear who had given birth to this baby in her sleep — holding the little cub off the ground in his gloved right hand. As usual he scraped his stomach. Being short and scrawny was an advantage in his line of work, but this maneuver wasn't easy even for him.

Out in the pale winter daylight, he knelt in a pile of oak leaves to dump the baby gently into the pan of the scales and hold them up by the hook at the top. Pulling off his right glove with his teeth, he recorded the weight, 1.3 kilos, on a PocketPad, drew a blood sample, and stapled an ear

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tag into the now-squawling baby's left ear — left for male. "Sorry, Rocket. Sorry, little guy."

His movements were neat and practiced, and he was also hurrying. It was always best to reduce stress on the infant bears by being quick, but today Denny had a couple of extra reasons for hurrying. The winter, like most winters nowadays, was mild. Too mild. Denny had waited for the coldest weather he could, but the mother bear might not be all that deeply asleep. The other reason, of course, was that he couldn't hear the helicopter any more, meaning that it had landed and that the Hefn Observer would be at the cabin by now, probably pacing back and forth on the deck, increasingly irritated as Denny continued to fail to show up. Punctuality mattered to the Hefn. In four years, this Hefn — Innisfrey, the Observer for Wildlife Habitat Recovery — had never been late for a rendezvous.

Denny wiggled his hand back into its gauntlet, picked up the cub, and wormed his way back into the den. His body almost completely blocked what little light seeped through the entrance, but he'd left the flashlight just inside, and so could see where to press the cub against his mother's chest until he started to suckle. The other baby turned loose more cooperatively; but as it did so the mother bear made a harsh sound deep in her throat and moved her massive shoulder. Denny froze, his heart leaping into his own throat, the purloined cub complaining and squirming in the leather gauntlet. But it was okay, she settled down again, so he backed the rest of the way out and sat puffing until his pulse rate returned to normal. He had always been against tranquilizing the mothers for the cubs' first couple of physicals — the sedative got into their milk and affected the babies — but for the first time he wondered seriously if it mightn't be a good idea to reevaluate that policy in the light of how the animals were being affected by the warming climate.

Or maybe reevaluate Fish and Wildlife's whole approach to black bear management. At least in rural areas like this one, that the bears had been quick to recolonize as the aging, dwindling human population had abandoned their fields and pastures and moved into the towns, where there were services and the roads were maintained. Not even a wagon and team could get around very well over roads as bad as the ones around here had gotten to be, all potholes and big broken chunks of macadam. Even plain dirt would be better. Denny himself rode a horse (Rocinante) and led

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a pack mule (Roscoe) when he went into town for provisions. He wasn't much of a rider, but then he didn't have much of a choice.

The second cub was a female. "Rodeo," Denny told her, "that's your name, little bear." At 1.45 kilos she was slightly chubbier than her brother. Rodeo's "real" name was Number 439, the number on her tag. She was half of the third pair of cubs produced by Number 117, the sow presently enjoying her long winter's nap down in the den, a huge healthy animal and an excellent mother; all but one of her cubs had survived to adulthood. She was six years old, the one hundred seventeenth female to be radio-collared in the state of Kentucky since the Hefn had established the management program, and her "call name" was Rosetta. Like hurricanes, study bears were call-named by cycling through the letters of the alphabet. Cubs kept the first two letters of their mother's name through subsequent generations, which allowed each initial to be used many times. If by some chance all the children and children's children of a particular bear should die, the pair of letters would not be retired but would go back into service, available for use by the next young bear who wandered across the state line from Tennessee or West Virginia. To change state of residence was to become part of a different study and get a whole new identity.

Rosetta hadn't done that; she was a Kentuckian born and bred, like Denny himself, though (also like Denny) she had wandered about for a good while before settling down in Denny's district and digging herself this excellent den under a huge oak blown over in a tornado. He hadn't named her or her first pair of cubs, who'd still been traveling with her when she'd moved into the county. But he'd named the next pair (Rocannon and Rotorooter), and was keeping a whole list of Ro- names in reserve.

Rodeo, having protestingly donated some blood and acquired a numbered ear tag of her own, resumed suckling the instant Denny put her back on the nipple, and this time her mother didn't stir. Rosetta's collar appeared to be in decent shape and was still sending a good clear signal. Denny made a judgment call against taking samples of Rosetta's blood today and exited the den. He poked his syringes and test tubes into the fingers of the gauntlets and stuffed them into his daypack, along with the scales and PocketPad and flashlight, and headed for the cabin at once, walking briskly, shrugging on the pack. The air was pretty cold, a little

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below freezing; he fished a watch cap out of his jacket pocket to pull down over his bald spot and his ears, and jammed his hands into his pockets.

Now that he was done with the bears, he looked at his watch and shifted mental gears. The Hefn Observer had been kept waiting for nearly an hour. Denny walked faster, almost jogging, a short wiry man with an anxious, rather ferretty face. The view from the ridge through gaps in the cedars, folded hills dusted over with snow under a pale sky, was lovely in its bareness, but Denny had scant attention to spare for it this day. Hurrying past the viewpoint with the nicest prospect without a sideways glance, he plunged into a tunnel formed by cedar trees lining the sides of what had once been a wagon road.

The Hefn had ordered field studies of bears, coyotes, elk, and white-tailed deer in the eastern United States, it was their initiative; they were monitoring the ecological health of the planet by monitoring its apex predators and their prey species as these reclaimed or moved into habitat that year by year was returning to a wild state. But funding for Denny's particular field study in Anderson County depended on satisfying the Hefn Observer to whom he reported, and failing to pay this fact due notice (by being dilatory) was not good politics. Denny had been on the job since the beginning of the project, and knew he was very good at what he did, but you still had to kowtow on a regular basis to the goddamned Hefn. He basically hated the Hefn, something he had in common with just about everybody else in the world. Answering to them was the disagreeable part of the bear study.

His whole situation was conflicted. It was probably the worst time in human history to be a human being, but it was also, he had to acknowledge it, one of the best to be a wildlife biologist in your own back yard. If it weren't for the Hefn, and their Directive, and the Baby Ban Broadcast that had sterilized just about every person on the planet, there would be no black bear population in east central Kentucky — or elk population, or population of coyotes approaching the size of wolves, all busily subspeciating in the fascinating ways they were doing. Without the Hefn Takeover, east central Kentucky — now a recovering climax oak-hickory forest — would still be growing tobacco and Black Angus steers, and spindling big round bales of tall-fescue hay. The state's black bears would still be in the Daniel Boone National Forest on the West Virginia border,

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way over in the Appalachian foothills, with far too few bears to go around for the numbers of local people eager to study them.

Denny really loved his work. Except in abstract terms he cared much more about baby bears than he did about human babies, but he despised the Hefn anyhow. The problem didn't get simpler. Mostly he just accepted the way things were and focused on his job, but every time he had to show up for one of these meetings the conflict would boil up inside him again.

The ragged alley of tall cedars ended abruptly and he emerged into the clearing where the cabin sat. Beyond it hulked the chopper, a big metal dragonfly. Neither the Hefn nor the chopper pilot, a human, were anywhere to be seen. Denny trotted up the steps and along the deck and pushed open the cabin door.

A young woman in her mid-twenties or thereabouts was hunkered down in front of the stove, putting in chunks of firewood; she closed and latched the little door and stood to face him, dusting off her hands. "Hi," said Denny. "I guess I'm a little late. I was vetting some new cubs and kind of got into a situation. Where's the Hefn Observer?" As he spoke he stuffed the watch cap in his pocket and hung the backpack on a hook by the door.

"He went for a walk. He was getting sleepy," she said. "It's not Innisfrey this time, it's Humphrey. I'm Marian Hoffman, by the way."

"The pilot, right?" She nodded. "Denny Demaree." They shook hands. Denny started to unzip his parka, then had a thought. "Uh — maybe I should go try to find him? Did he walk down to the road?"

"He just went straight past the pond and on down the hill. Bushwhacking. On all fours, the last I saw of him. I guess he doesn't get out of the city much."

Denny considered. If the Hefn hadn't stuck to either of the farm's rough wagon roads, he could be anywhere. "Then I guess I'll wait." He hung his jacket on another hook and threw himself into one armchair, and Marian took the other. The next instant he sprang out of the chair. "Hang on, did you say *Humphrey*? The Bureau of Temporal Physics and the Apprentices and all that — the one that does the viddy program? What the hell is *he* doing here?"

"Don't ask me, I just fly the chopper." She smiled. "Nice little place you've got here. Pretty luxurious for a field office."

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"I — " Denny stopped and willed himself to calm down. Humphrey. He had a bad feeling about this, but there was nothing to do but wait for the Hefn to show up. He sat down again. "Yeah, it *is* nice. Some old lady built this cabin and willed it and the whole farm to the local Girl Scout Council for a camp. The actual farm is a hundred acres, and a long time ago it used to be in my family, with a house down by the road. The well's still there. This place, the cabin, was used as an admin building when the Scouts had it."

"Then time went by, and there weren't any more Brownies coming up through the ranks?"

He nodded. "The Scouts turned the place over to the state when they disbanded, and the state turned it over to Fish and Wildlife when the Hefn tapped them to monitor wildlife recovery." He hopped up again, nervously. "I feel like I shouldn't just be sitting around."

"Humphrey's not like Innisfrey," Marian said. "He won't jump all over you for not being here on time. At least I don't think he will."

"Yeah, but why's he here?" Denny said. He opened the door to the porch and walked outside, scanning the whole long view from left to right. Nothing.

"'Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?'" Marian called to him from inside.

Denny was surprised, and a little intrigued. The line, which he recognized but hadn't thought of in decades, was from a kids' edition of Grimm's Fairy Tales. Kids' edition or not, the story had given him nightmares. From deep within itself his memory obliged with the right response: " 'Naught but the wind a-blowing, naught but the green grass growing.' Man, I can't believe I still remember that! I reckon it must've been high summer in Bluebeard's kingdom, the grass won't green up here for a good while yet."

"But here is Bluebeard himself," came a deep voice from the deck, and the Hefn Humphrey burst through the other door and swept into the room.

Denny bolted to the porch doorway just in time to catch the Hefn's showy entrance. He darted inside while Humphrey shut the other door and turned to greet him properly. "You were expecting my colleague Innisfrey. I am, as you see, not Innisfrey, however. No. Innisfrey is at present otherwise engaged. I offered to take this meeting in his place, as

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I was already in Kentucky for a reason of my own. Humphrey, BTP. I am pleased to meet you, George Dennis Demaree."

Denny stared, more or less dumbfounded. He had of course seen Humphrey on the viddy, doing regular progress reports and updates and announcements. Also scoldings. Humphrey was the highest-profile Observer of the lot, and had had the most to do with humans since the Takeover, but the image on the screen, to which he had paid as little attention as possible, had not prepared Denny for the force of Humphrey's personality. He *looked* like Innisfrey, his short, stocky, oddly jointed figure, covered entirely with gray hair (including a long shaggy beard which, though gray like the rest of him, made his improvised witticism particularly apt), with large opaque eyes and forked hands and feet. He also looked, truth to tell, rather moth-eaten. Denny knew why; the anti-hibernation drugs the wakeful Hefn had to take in winter made their hair fall out in clumps. And he had Innisfrey's faintly gamy wet-dog odor.

But the quality of his presence wasn't remotely like cold, supercilious, charmless Innisfrey's. All in all, the clash between apprehensive expectation and reality was so disorienting that it took Denny almost a minute to pull his wits together enough to apologize for being late.

"Not at all, not at all. Your tardiness providentially provided me with a chance to stretch my legs. The country hereabouts is delightful; your work here must have given you great pleasure."

Denny nodded; then, realizing that he and his visitor were both still standing, blurted, "Uh, would you like to sit down?"

Humphrey said, "As it appears that we have two chairs and two humans and one Hefn in this room, I propose that you and Marian Hoffman take the chairs." And thereupon the Hefn Humphrey, household word, movie star, viddy personality, most powerful Observer on Earth, dropped to all fours, ambled over to the woodstove, and flomped onto the rag rug. He looked like a scruffy, off-color Great Pyrenees. "All right, Marian Hoffman? All right, George Dennis Demaree?" He gazed mildly from one to the other with those odd flat eyes, and Denny found himself in danger of being seriously disarmed.

Marian had stood when Humphrey came in. She and Denny looked at each other, and then both sat down in the chairs they had been sitting in before.

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"Now, to business! I am delighted to be the bearer of happy tidings," Humphrey said, and the flat eyes somehow conveyed an impression of beaming with pleasure. "Innisfrey has, as you might say, filled me in, and I have examined the radio reports you have filed, and the written reports, all of them, for the entire duration of this study. You have done excellent work here! Thanks to you, and to the studies of coyotes and white-tailed deer carried forward by your fellow wildlife biologists, we have a complete and detailed picture of the top two predators for this recovering habitat, together with their most important large prey species, over the past four years.

"During this period in this area, the black bear population has experienced a seventy-four percent gain in numbers. Eighty-six percent of the bears are not immigrants but bears native to east central Kentucky. Remarkable! More than that, the bears are, might one say, in the pink? A comical expression to apply to a dark-colored bear! Their reproductive success has been excellent, and they are in prime condition! As the flora here proceed through the various stages of succession, the entire ecosystem burgeons and thrives.

"Therefore! With no reason whatever for concern that the trend is in danger of reversing itself, we have determined," Humphrey said from his shaggy-sheepdog position on the floor, giving again that impression of beaming up into Denny's face, "to terminate this study, and to reassign you, George Dennis Demaree, to a location in particular need of the skills you have exercised so diligently in this one. Congratulations!" And he bounded up and offered Denny his forked, hairy hand.

Denny bounded up as well. "But the study's not finished!" he protested, his voice loud and rude with shock. Instead of shaking Humphrey's hand, he waved his arms wildly. "It's nowhere near finished! I designed it to run for ten years, that's the way my data spreadsheets are configured — I don't want to drop it now! I can't! I can't believe you want to pull me out *now!*"

At Denny's outburst the Hefn's beamish-boy look faded away; his demeanor became more closed and quiet, and when he spoke his voice had lost much of its hearty charm. "I regret that you do not wish to end your work here. I regret to learn that in your view it is incomplete. Our view, however, is different. We consider you to have been entirely successful.

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Thanks to you, we know that this area is well on its way to climax. Also thanks to you, we know that biodiversity increases every year. This is all we need to know. Whether you choose to accept reassignment is, of course, a decision you must make for yourself, but there are a great many other recovering habitat areas in Kentucky about which we know too little, and where your skills would be of great service."

Denny, so angry he was almost sputtering, managed to let him finish. "It doesn't *work* like that!" he blurted the instant Humphrey stopped talking. "Wildlife biology is important *for its own sake!* Understanding how the bears adapt as this farmland reverts to climax forest doesn't end because some practical purpose has been served! You — you Hefn never told me you'd turn up one day and tell me to pack up my stuff and leave! I did everything you told me to, nobody ever complained that the work wasn't done well — you're throwing me out for doing a good job!"

Marian moved uneasily in her chair, and Denny suddenly remembered, like a bucket of cold water, who he was talking to. The Hefn, as he knew perfectly well, could do whatever they damn pleased. They had absolute power over the people of Earth, and most Hefn felt no sympathy for humanity, given the mess humanity had made of its own planet, and how hard the aliens had had to work to get them to clean it up. This Hefn, Humphrey, was probably the one with the *most* sympathy for the plight of the Earth's people, many of whom were suffering a good deal from the cleanup process. If he said the study was over, it was probably over.

Denny was wild. What a fool he'd been, to fall into the comfy habit of assuming he'd been assigned to this field study for the sake of science, and that as long as he minded his P's and Q's he would be allowed to continue. He'd been assigned here because it pleased the Hefn to study the bears of east central Kentucky for a while. Now they were done doing that, evidently, and he could take a new assignment or go and do something else entirely, they didn't much care which. What they would not let him do was the one thing he wanted to do: keep on living in this cabin, watching Rocket and Rodeo develop under the tutelage of Rosetta, recording their weight, examining their scats under a microscope, radio-collaring them in due course, observing as they found mates and began the next generation.

Then he had another thought. "What about Jason and Angie, are you pulling them out too?"

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"The studies of Jason Gotschalk and Angela Rivera are integral with your own. The coyotes are thriving. The white-tailed deer are thriving. The elk are thriving. Everything is thriving! We would not allow any element of this area study to continue unless all were to continue, nor would we terminate one without terminating all." Humphrey sounded so benevolent as he said this, you would think he was doing them all a favor by yanking them out of the field.

Denny had one more card to play, so he played it, not expecting to gain much by it but needing to try. "I'm a Gaian," he said. "This is my Ground. A hundred years ago my family owned this farm, and I'd like to stay here, even if the study isn't to be funded anymore." Stay and do a little unofficial-work with Rosetta and her family and the half-dozen other breeding sows he'd been following, until the equipment wore out. Or, if they took that all away to a different site, just record observations, do odd jobs in town to buy food, hunker down here for as long as he could.

Humphrey immediately became less alien-seeming, but no less definite. "Then I am truly sorry," he said, sounding as if he meant it. "But alas, no one may stay. Our Lords the Gafr have decreed that wherever habitat studies have been terminated, the human presence shall be excluded until recovery is complete."

The Gafr were the boss aliens that nobody had ever seen. They directed things from their ship parked on the Moon, and what they said was final.

"When?" Denny asked, finally defeated.

"We will help you gather your personal things together," said Humphrey kindly.

He meant they were going to fly him out *now*. "What about the horse and the mule?"

"They will be transferred to another field station. Yours, if you decide to accept reassignment. And I will gladly put you in touch with the Gaian Steward in Louisville, who should be able to assist you in finding another suitable Ground. Very possibly a way might be devised to match your new assignment with such a place."

And kick me out again when you decided I'd done enough there, Denny thought. No thanks.

"As a Gaian, you could perhaps be assigned to the terrain around Hurt

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Hollow? Would that interest you? Bears have been sighted nearby. Pam Pruitt is in residence there at present, but some arrangement could surely be worked out."

Denny glanced up at this, but his mind was in turmoil. "I...don't know. I need to think." He gazed around the cabin, the place he had gradually let himself come to think of as home for the foreseeable future, now on the far side of an absolute divide; it was like looking through a Time Window into the past. "Most of this stuff stays with the cabin. The dishes and bedding and all that. The short-wave set."

"We will help you gather up what does not, yes, Marian Hoffman?"

"I'd rather do it myself. I won't be long. You could damp down the stove if you want something to do."

There really wasn't much to pack: some dirty laundry, a razor, the daypack with the bear equipment, a few books and computer disks, the PocketPad, the laptop, his field glasses, his other pair of boots. Denny threw it all on the bed and went down in the basement, mind reeling from the sudden shift of direction, to get his duffel bag.

Under the stairs, piled in the doorless tornado shelter, were the abandoned remnants of the old farm's incarnation as Camp Sheltowee: rolled-up sleeping bags, tents, deflated air mattresses, mess kits, canteens.... Denny's disoriented brain suddenly focused. He touched nothing, only stood still for a moment before heading back up with the empty duffel. But his mind was made up.

The chopper dropped him at the regional headquarters of Fish and Wildlife in Frankfort and whirled off to collect his two still-unsuspecting colleagues. Tess Perry, Denny's boss, threw up her arms in protest at his accusing glare. "We had absolutely no clue they were going to pull this! The first I knew about it, here was Humphrey instead of Innisfrey, saying I should alert Louisville to get ready to reassign three field researchers, they were closing down East Central. *This office* is being closed down! I tried to warn you and the other two but you'd all gone out."

"I was checking on Rosetta's cubs," he said bitterly. "So what happens now?"

"Reassignment, like he said." And at the look on Denny's face, "I know, I know, believe me, but you need to think about it anyway before you burn any bridges. When they get back here with Angie and Jason

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they're taking y'all to Louisville." She pronounced it "Luh:uv'le." "They're giving me a week to close up the office, then guess where I'm being transferred to. Paducah! Think I want to go to Paducah?"

"Your parents live here in Frankfort, don't they?"

"My whole goddam family lives in Frankfort! But I'm going to Paducah, because right now I haven't got a better idea, and till I come up with one I'm keeping on the right side of the Hefn."

Denny groaned. "God, I hate the fuckers."

"Not any more than I do," said Tess glumly, "but if you want to keep on doing wildlife biology, stay on their good side, that's all I'm saying."

DENNY SAID NOTHING to any of them about his plan, not Tess, not his rumpled and furious fellow deportees. In Louisville he went through the motions of being debriefed and counseled about reassignment, took a couple of days to "think it over," discussing options with Angie and Jason and the teams from the eastern part of the state, who had also been praised to the skies and yanked out of the field.

In the end, after a lot of grumbling, the others all agreed to be posted elsewhere, at least for the time being. Humphrey must indeed have put in a word, because when they interviewed Denny they offered him Hurt Hollow, the Gaian shrine thirty miles upriver. He thanked them politely but said he'd like to apply for an unpaid leave, take some time to consider all his options, including that one, which he hinted was an attractive possibility. Unlike the others, the territory he'd been relieved from was his Ground; that made it harder to know what to do. He mentioned visiting his brother in Pittsburgh; you could get to Pittsburgh by steamboat, right up the Ohio River from Louisville.

The interviewing officer was sympathetic; he too was a Gaian, an early convert who had also chosen family property as his Ground, and could appreciate what a blow it must be for Denny to lose his study area *and* be forced off the farm. Talking about the Hefn and their imperious ways, his face got very tight. He encouraged Denny to think about Hurt Hollow; they needed someone there and it would be good if the someone were a Gaian, who would appreciate the place's historic significance.

A round-trip ticket to Pittsburgh was arranged. Denny, cleaned up,

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with a new haircut and his duffel full of clean clothes, boarded the boat and stood at the railing as it steamed upriver (passing legendary Hurt Hollow, which showed no sign of anyone being in residence), calling at Madison and Milton, Denny's home town, and finally at Carrollton, where the Kentucky River poured into the Ohio.

At Carrollton he left the boat, his scrawny, scruffy figure melting into the flow of disembarking passengers, and boarded a mule-hauled flatboat bound up the Kentucky for Frankfort and points south and east. He bought his ticket on board. It was dusk of the following day when he stepped off at the landing at Tyrone, under the railroad bridge that spanned the river from bluff to high bluff.

While waiting for full dark to fall, he converted his duffel into a backpack by adjusting some straps. It was good and bad that there was no Moon. In the blackness he slipped by side roads, now no more than tracks around the town of Lawrenceburg with its inconvenient street lights, and set off up the road he had traveled so many times on Rocinante's back. He was heading for the cabin.

A mile west of Lawrenceburg he encountered a line of signposts, brand new, marching away from the road in both directions and forward along both margins. It was too dark to read the smaller print, but the word in large type at the top was WARNING! He didn't need to read the rest, or wonder who had posted the warnings. By continuing along the road he was, in effect, entering a narrow corridor through a forbidden zone. Denny shrugged, made a face, and forged ahead.

That he knew the road from horseback as well as he did was a lucky thing; the night was very dark, with a mean headwind, and the damaged black surface was hard to see. He found a stick to probe with and felt his way along the edge, cursing the need to go so slowly.

At four in the morning Denny reached the bridge over the intermittent stream he called Part-Time Creek, which established the eastern boundary of the old farm, and probed his way in total blackness down into the bed of the creek. Its jumble of rocks was dry — no water or ice in the bed to make things worse — but inching upstream in the dark without falling was so close to impossible that more than an hour had passed before Denny felt he was far enough from the road to risk pushing up through a tangle of brush to flat land.

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But he came out where he had intended to, behind the skeletal tobacco barn where the Scout camp's maintenance equipment had been kept. Tobacco barns were built with spaces between the vertical boards, so the circulating air could cure the tobacco leaves hung in bunches from the rafters. The barn was therefore poor protection from the wind, and also listing badly. But Denny had stored Rocinante's and Roscoe's hay in the loft, and had nailed the saggy ladder tight to the uprights. He had gambled that the Hefn hadn't found and salvaged that hay, and the gamble paid off. Working by memory and feel, avoiding the weak spots in the floor of the loft, he built a windbreak out of bales. He cut the twine from another bale to make a mattress, scratchy but fragrant, of loose hay (carefully rolling up the cut pieces of twine and stuffing them in his pants pocket), then piled more hay over himself and his stuff and pulled his watch cap down over his ears and his parka hood up over that. By first light he was sound asleep.

Nothing woke him; he woke himself, startled awake from a dream of crossing an endlessly broad, jaggedly tumbled polar ice floe in Arctic blackness. He was feeling his way with something like an ice axe lashed to the end of a ski pole, thinking *This would make a good weapon if a polar bear comes along*, when just then a polar bear *did* loom dazzlingly out of the darkness. But after a first thrill of fear, Denny realized that the bear was smiling and nodding in a benevolent way. "Want a lift?" it said. There was a fuzzy white cub on its back already, sitting up like a human child on a pony. "Sure," said Denny, and he scrambled up on the bear's back behind the cub. But then the bear began to gallop across the rough ice. There was nothing to hold onto except the cub, and Denny understood that he absolutely must not take the cub down with him. As he was jolted off its mother's slippery back, he woke himself up yelling.

Fine, why not just go out and blow a trumpet blast to let everybody know where he was? Fully awake and instantly aware of his situation, Denny swore silently as he pushed back the parka hood and watch cap, straining to hear anything that would suggest he'd given himself away. But there was nothing, no sound at all, not even wind keening through the cracks between the slats. It was perfectly still. Nor could he see any signs of advancing, vengeful Hefn through those cracks. The day was overcast, chilly but not terribly cold. He looked at his watch: 3:46. It wouldn't be dark enough to leave the barn for a couple more hours at least. After

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squirming around in the hay to try to go back to sleep, which proved impossible, he sat up cautiously and peered around.

The inside of the barn appeared exactly as he had last seen it. That probably meant that the Hefn had taken it for the derelict it was; probably they hadn't even opened the doors facing the road, which were stuck tight anyway, to peer inside. Roscoe's tracks were around if you looked, but he and Rocinante had been stabled in the little shed near the cabin that housed the cistern and in former times the pump.

Denny passed the remaining hours of daylight eating a sandwich and a packet of craisins, checking his watch every couple of minutes, and going over and over the reasons why he wasn't going to be caught in the loft like a cornered rat. He knew the penalty for disobeying a direct order from the Hefn. He knew what those signs said besides WARNING! They said that persons caught willfully trespassing on posted land would have their memories erased. This was no idle threat, it happened every so often when frustration about the Baby Ban built up enough somewhere on the planet that people had to fight back, despite the failure and horrible punishment of everybody who had ever tried that — as far as Denny knew, every rebellion had failed completely.

Wiped transgressors were always displayed on international viddy. Denny had seen the bewildered, pitiful products of Hefn mindwipe on the screen and been horrified, like everyone else. He had never expected to risk that sort of treatment for himself — worse than execution in a way — and not until now had he understood why people were sometimes driven, despite the utter pointlessness of defying the Hefn, to defy them anyway.

When Denny had had plenty of time to drive himself bonkers, the light finally began to fade, and then it was twilight, and then full dark. He made himself wait until six, and then with a sneeze of relief threw off the covering of hay. He emptied the duffelpack, piling his things at the top of the ladder, and put the pack on. Outside the barn he spent a couple of minutes brushing himself off and picking hay seeds and scratchy stalks out of his hair and collar.

His next move was to approach the cabin from the rear, to find out whether any Hefn were actually in residence. Hefn could see extremely well at night, and Humphrey had gone off scouting on his own without

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getting lost, that day he had thrown Denny off the farm. But Denny still felt confident that here in the open on his own Ground he enjoyed a certain advantage.

A wagon road ran alongside Part-Time Creek up the hollow; he followed it cautiously for a little while, then struck left, straight uphill, scrambling, pulling himself along using saplings or going on all fours. He startled a little group of white-tailed deer bedded down on the hillside and heard them bound away, making a lot of noise in the dry leaves. *They* could see what they were doing. He was making a lot of noise himself, but there was no help for it, he couldn't see a thing. But he wasn't lost; all he had to do to get where he was going was keep heading straight uphill. When he felt he was far enough from the barn not to leave a sign for the once-predatory Hefn, he paused to pee into a tangle of blackberry canes.

After a while, puffing and sweating, he came to the edge of the woods and stopped to catch his breath. The hillside sloped more gently here. Directly ahead he could see the glint of the septic lagoon, and above that the pond; and beyond the pond the cabin stood beneath bare trees on top of the ridge. Because he knew where to look, Denny could see its faint outline, blacker than the night sky. The place had a deserted feel to it; now that he had it in view, he was ready to bet that nobody, Hefn or human, waking or sleeping, was inside. There was also no helicopter parked on the site of the former garden. Breathing more easily, but still being careful, Denny climbed to the ridge, hugging the tree line. Where the driveway dipped out of sight of the cabin, he ducked across and slipped into the stable: empty. They had left the hay behind, but the horse and the mule had been evacuated.

His plan called for stealing a sleeping bag and tent from the stash in the basement — on this sortie or, if obstacles developed, a later one. There seemed no reason to wait. The lock on the patio door had rusted out long ago, so he didn't have to break in. He rummaged in the storm shelter with utmost stealth, but it felt more like a game of cops and robbers than anything truly dangerous. The cabin was empty; intuitively he was certain of this. Maybe it would stand empty for years now, while the land around it went completely wild. Maybe the Hefn had such complete confidence in the deterrent power of their warning signs that they weren't

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going to bother checking to be sure everybody was in compliance. Maybe this was going to be easier than he had expected.

But that didn't allow for sloppiness. He knew it would take all his skill in camping and woodcraft to leave no trace of his presence for an overflying chopper to detect.

He found what he needed by feel. Besides the sleeping bag, pad, and tent, he took some cooking gear, a mess kit, a canteen, and a jerry can. That was all. He left everything else exactly as he'd found it, trusting that a Hefn casting a casual eye around the basement would never notice that some of this castoff junk had disappeared. The aluminum cookware had canvas covers and didn't clank. He packed it all in the duffel and slipped out, closing the patio door with elaborate care, despite his perfect certainty that nobody was at home in what had used to be his home.

Denny set up camp directly across the main road from the tobacco barn, on the north bank of Indian Creek. Working fast by pale dawn light, he pitched the pup tent in a small clearing ringed by the unkempt-looking red cedar trees that popped up in any patch of open ground hereabouts. From the road he would be invisible.

Maybe not from the air, however. He recklessly spent a hour of early daylight cutting cedar boughs and tying them to a makeshift exterior ridge pole with pieces of twine from the cut bales of hay, until the tent had a camouflage roof of cedar thatching. None of this could be accomplished in perfect silence, but he did his best.

Finally he crawled into the tent, inflated the pad, unzipped the sleeping bag, removed his boots and parka, and called it a day. Or a night. I'd better get used to the nocturnal life, he told himself. Moving around much in the daytime will be too risky. If we get snow cover I won't be able to move around at all. Fire's going to be a problem.... Listing these obstacles, he wasn't sure how long he would be able to stick to his plan. But any more time at all with the bears was better than none, if he didn't get caught.

Night and day are about the same to a hibernating bear. The calculated risk he was running seemed very much worth it to Denny the next nightfall, as he stood outside Rosetta's den, pulling on the leather gauntlets he had

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managed to sneak into his duffel — along with the other contents of his daypack, the scales and flashlight and PocketPad — almost under Humphrey's nose, while he was being extradited. This day, the third since his arrival at the farm, had been cold, around twenty degrees F. He'd huddled in his cocoon of down in the afternoon and thought out what he meant to do, then cut straight up from the road to the ridge top through deep woods as night was falling, and now he stood in the leaves tingling with exhilaration. He was here, despite everything that had been done to try to stop him. He would see the cubs again, weigh them, record the weights. Having no way to keep blood samples frozen till he could get them to a lab, he wasn't going to draw any blood. But he would keep the other records as best he could, carry on the research a while longer. He felt he owed it to himself, and to the bears, and to humanity in general. As much as anything, this was an act of secret defiance against the Hefn.

Swelled with a sense of purpose, he fished out the flashlight, flopped on his belly, and crawled into the den. Aiming low, he switched on the light, the first light he had used to break the darkness for three days running. The rank heap of Rosetta lay on its side, casting a looming shadow on the wall of the den, head tucked down, enormous paws curled inward. The cubs were snuggled against her. Denny crawled forward on his forearms, wildlife biologist displacing radical insurgent, beside himself with eagerness to see the cubs, see how much they'd grown in more than two weeks.

His right hand had closed on the nape fur of the first cub, a bigger, fatter Rodeo, when the beam of the flashlight fell on the second cub. This wasn't Rocket, he saw that at once. Rocket was gone. This cub was a little bigger than Rocket had been two weeks ago, but visibly smaller than Rodeo was right now, and more nearly black than cinnamon brown. How in the world had it gotten here? He released his grip on Rodeo and reached for the changeling.

Just as he was about to touch it, the cub shifted its hold on the nipple, screwing up its little face against the light. Denny's hand jerked back as if snakebit while his brain did a slow cartwheel, trying to interpret what he was seeing by the flashlight's weirdifying glare. This little animal wasn't a bear cub at all. Its shape and color were wrong, its proportions were wrong...what *was* it? What could have happened? He squirmed

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closer and aimed the light directly at the cub's head, trying to see its face. Again it screwed its eyes shut, and this time it let go of the nipple and made a thin sound of complaint. Its hairy little forelimbs, that had been rummaging in Rosetta breast fur, waved in the air, little arms ending in — in —

It felt like a crack of lightning. By straining every ounce of self-control Denny managed not to scream, not to flail his way out of the den. But he backed out a lot faster than he'd crawled in, shutting off the flashlight before emerging not from prudence but by habit alone. He took off down the ridge trail toward the cabin by habit also, fleeing in blind panic until, inevitably, he tripped on something and fell flat.

Lying where he'd fallen, he struggled to master his shock. The second cub was a baby Hefn. A baby Hefn! In a bear's den! There had never been a baby Hefn anywhere on Earth before — but a bear's den in the middle of winter! This was a mystery beyond all solving, but Denny had understood one thing the instant he laid eyes on the baby Hefn: his situation was no longer one of calculated risk but of imminent suicide. Probably no human in the world knew about this but himself. It wasn't possible to imagine that the baby had been put into Rosetta's den by anyone other than an adult Hefn, Humphrey or Innisfrey. The biologists had obviously been thrown out of this territory so the baby could be planted in the den.

Baby or babies? Only this den, or others as well, in other study areas? In other states? *Countries*? Denny shook his head to clear it, and stood up cautiously. It didn't matter; what mattered was, he had to get out of here *now* or he would be the featured attraction at the next Hefn humiliation event on the viddy. No disobedience of Hefn law could result more obviously in mindwipe than this one of his. There was no doubt in his mind that he had blundered onto something top secret, and none that the Hefn would be back often to check on their little bundle of joy. He had to get away.

But also, he had to leave no trace of his having been there, and in his panic flight he had left the daypack behind. Okay: retrieve the pack, then get down through the woods to the road as fast as possible, break camp, ditch the camping gear someplace, hotfoot it back to Lawrenceburg, and catch the first boat back to Carrollton tomorrow. Thinking these things, he groped his way back to the den.

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And then what? Denny stood staring at the great pale shape that was the gigantic fallen oak forming a lintel for the entrance to the den. A tree could grow that big on marginal farmland, he thought irrelevantly, for one reason only: it had stood on a fence line since it was a sapling.

Hop a boat to Carrollton, *and then what*? Agree to study the Hurt Hollow bears, keep his head down and his mouth shut? I should go back down there, he thought. It's only been a couple of minutes and already I don't believe it myself. If I'm going to break the story (*was* he going to break the story?) I have to know for sure that I saw what I think I saw.

If only I had a camera, he thought with regret. A holocamera, or a diskorder. Might as well wish for the Moon. But nobody's going to believe this unless I have some kind of proof.

For a mad moment he considered kidnapping the baby Hefn, proof incontrovertible of what had happened here. But he didn't, of course, know how to take care of it, and if one hair of the baby's bearded little chinny-chin-chin should accidentally be hurt...and anyway, consequences aside, this baby was, in one sense, Rosetta's suckling cub and Rodeo's foster sibling. He didn't want it on his conscience if somehow he (he?) got hurt.

More than anything in the world, Denny did not want to go back down into Rosetta's den, but he did it anyway. There was no mistake. The baby had tiny, forked, four-fingered hands, two digits opposed to the other two. It was hairy all over. It had whiskers. It was much darker than the adult Hefn, all of whom were varying shades of gray, but there could be no doubt that this was the infant form of the same kind of creature.

Having made certain of this, Denny wriggled back out into the night with only one urgent need on his mind. This time he remembered the pack, and remembered to head in the right direction, straight toward his campsite on the creek, a long up-and-down — mostly down — scramble in the dark. Interestingly enough, he was getting much better at seeing and moving about in the dark.

He broke camp, stuffed all his gear into the duffel, and started, relatively sure-footedly, back down the road toward town. Having done this much, his mind began to hum and click; and after a while he had a sort of plan.

* * *

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Denny had been to Hurt Hollow lots of times, as a little school kid when Jesse Kellum was still the caretaker and keeper of the (metaphorical) flame, and afterward, when it had been closed to the public, as a Gaian initiate. He knew all about Orrin and Hannah Hubbell, the legendary couple who had built the house and kept goats and bees there, and written about their life "on the fringe of society." They were classic proto-Gaians. While Jesse Kellum was caretaker, Pam Pruitt had been a girl living across the river in Indiana. She'd spent a lot of time here in her teens, helping Jesse, even after the Hefn Humphrey had chosen her to be one of the first group of math-prodigy Apprentices to be trained by Humphrey in how to operate the Time Transceivers that could open a window into the past.

Denny also knew that Pruitt had lost her math intuition and no longer worked at the Bureau of Temporal Physics, though she continued to work with and for the Bureau. She had remained close to Humphrey, and had become prominent in the Gaian movement after leaving the Bureau's Santa Barbara headquarters. Nowadays she was something or other to do with the Mormon Church, and ordinarily lived in Salt Lake City.

The reason he knew so much about Pam Pruitt was partly that she was a local celeb, the only Apprentice ever with close ties to Kentucky, and partly because she had been associated with Hurt Hollow in his mind as long as he could remember. The Hollow was important to all Gaians, but the place had been Pam Pruitt's personal Ground before it ever became a shrine. She was part of Gaian lore in Kentucky, and especially in Denny's home town of Milton, directly across the river from Madison, Indiana, five miles from the Scofield College campus where Pruitt had lived as a child. Though he'd never met her, he'd grown up knowing all about her.

Humphrey had said she was in residence now, probably on a personal retreat and not happy about being burst in upon. He wasn't one hundred percent certain that she wouldn't betray him to Humphrey, but he thought not. And she had a lot of influence with the Hefn. If he was going to tell anybody, he could think of no better person to dump his problem on.

Denny boarded a southbound steamboat in Carrollton and got off at Milton with half a dozen other people. He could have asked the pilot to let him off at the Hurt Hollow landing, but it wasn't a regular stop and he was afraid somebody might remember. Anyhow, from Milton you could walk

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to Hurt Hollow the back way, straight up the river bluff, along the bluff top by a maze of little roads, and down to the river again. The roads were bad here too, but at least he didn't feel obliged to hike all that way in the dark.

An electrified fence enclosed the whole sixty-one-acre tract of the Hollow from road to river. By the time he reached the upper gate it was late afternoon, and he was tired. He groaned at the prospect of bushwhacking all around the periphery of the property while the sky got darker and darker, but saw no alternative; the house was close to the river bank, a mile or so below the upper gate. From the top there was no way to signal the house. Pruitt wouldn't hear him if he yelled, and somebody else very well might.

He'd bought two sandwiches and an apple in Carrollton; he ate these now, sitting with his back against the gate, and drank some water from the Girl Scout canteen in its red and green plaid cover. The rest of the camping gear had been cached under the Salt River bridge, halfway between the farm and Lawrenceburg, but he'd kept the canteen with its useful built-in biofilter.

He thought of tossing his duffelpack over the fence, so as not to have to lug it along. But if Pruitt had left the Hollow by now, and Denny couldn't get in, he would need the stuff in the duffel. So in the end he started on what he hoped was the shorter way round the fence line with his burden still strapped to his aching shoulders.

It took him more than an hour to get down to the river, even traveling almost all downhill, and to work his way to the dock, but when he got there he saw the phone still mounted next to the lower gate. Thank God. Denny remembered how, on school trips, the teacher would pick up that very phone and a buzzer would sound faintly in the house, and Jesse Kellum would come down and unlock the gate. Now, if only the thing was in working order. How would he get Pruitt's attention tonight if it wasn't? His tired brain had nothing to suggest.

At least she was still there. Denny could see an oil lamp shining in the window and a lit lantern on the patio outside, and he smelled wood smoke. He could also hear a dog barking. He dropped his pack on the dock, opened the little door, and took the receiver off the hook. The line sounded dead to him, but inside the house a shadow moved, then there was a click, and a woman's voice said "Yes?" into his ear, and then "Feste, be quiet."

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Denny realized he hadn't thought out what he wanted to say. "Are you Pam Pruitt?" he inquired in a croaky voice — how long since he had actually talked to anybody? — and when she didn't answer he cleared his throat and rushed ahead. "My name's Denny Demaree, I'm a wildlife biologist, I've been studying black bears in Anderson County, the Hefn recovery program? I'm a Gaian, the farm where I've been working is my Ground. Something's happened. Could I speak with you?"

There was silence. Then the voice said, "This is Pam Pruitt. What do you mean, something's happened?"

"I, uh, can't tell you about it like this, I need to talk to you in person."

"Look, I'm on a retreat."

"I know, I'm really sorry, but this is — this can't wait. This is huge," Denny said. "Please."

"You knew I was making a retreat?"

"Not exactly, but the Hefn Humphrey told me you were here and I guessed it might be a retreat. I'm really sorry," he said again.

Another silence, then a sigh. "Okay. You're on the dock? I can come down for a couple of minutes."

Relieved, Denny tucked the phone away. He saw the door open and the lantern begin to wobble down the path toward him; by now it had become completely dark. Long before Pruitt reached the gate, her dog — so black Denny could see nothing but teeth and eyeshine — had rushed up and was growling through the woven wire. When she caught up with him, her first words were "Push up close against the fence and spread your arms and legs. Feste, check 'em out. Good boy, check 'em out." Denny did as he was told, feeling foolish, while the dog sniffed him industriously all over through the fence. "Now turn around and do it again...okay. Leave the bag where it is. Feste, on guard," and he heard the gate click.

Denny stepped inside, and was suddenly conscious of his appearance, which the cold-water tap in the packet's washroom had done little to improve. "Sorry I'm so grubby. I've been camping and didn't get a chance to clean up."

Pruitt held the lantern up to get a better look at him. "Camping where, in a coal mine?" But she grinned as she said it.

"On the farm where my study was being done. Humphrey terminated

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the project and threw me off the place, uh, around two or three weeks ago now I think it was, I've kind of lost track."

Pruitt's eyebrows shot up. "He threw you out and you snuck back in? Have you got a death wish? You could get yourself wiped for that."

"Like I don't know that! The study wasn't *finished*," Denny said defensively, "but anyway, what he said was that East Central should be left to recover on its own now, but I don't think that *is* why he kicked me out. Something else is going on."

Pruitt slowly lowered the lantern. "Like what?"

"You're not going to believe me," Denny said desperately, "I can't prove it to you, but last night, see, last night I went into a den to check on the cubs, I hadn't seen them since the day I got sent packing, I had a flashlight, and right away I realized that one of them was gone, and — "

"Oh-kay," Pruitt said, interrupting him. "You better come on up to the house then. Get your stuff and close the gate — slam it good and hard. Feste, school's out. Good job."

Denny stared at her, feeling chilled. "You know about it. You knew what I was going to say." He backed away, slipped through the gate and shut it between them with a clang. "You're tight with Humphrey — "

"It happens," said Pruitt mildly, "that Humphrey and I don't see eye to eye on the subject of — what you were about to tell me. It's your call, but you're in big trouble right now, so unless you've got someplace else to go, I'd come along quietly if I were you."

Denny sagged against the gate. The only other place he had to go, now that he knew what he knew, was back to work for Fish and Wildlife, which was itching to assign him to study bears right here in Hurt Hollow, only now he didn't even have that option if Pruitt exposed him to the Hefn. "How do I know you won't turn me over to *them*?"

She had started toward the house, but turned back to face him. "I guess you'll have to trust me on that, which I realize you have no reason to do, except that Gaians don't lie to each other, do they? And I give you my word that I won't."

Denny trudged behind her up the path to the house, dragging his duffel, stumbling with exhaustion. Pruitt set the lantern down and opened the door onto a warm wooden room with a bright fire on the hearth. The dog slipped through ahead of them both. "I expect you've been here before."

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"Yeah. Never at night, though." By the firelight he got his first good look at Feste, who was now sniffing his hand, and let out a snort of laughter. "A poodle? Your guard dog is a *poodle*?"

"Hey, poodles can be great guard dogs, they just don't usually look the part. With his hair cut like that, most people don't even know he's a poodle." The dog, jet-black, was clipped short all over and resembled a Saluki with tight curls.

"Our neighbors had a standard when I was a kid. I remember that long nose." He rubbed the dog's head and stifled a yawn.

Pruitt gave him a scrutinizing once-over. "You're completely done in. Why not get some sleep before we talk?" And at his skeptical look, "Far as I know, nobody knows about your little escapade yet, unless you've told somebody besides me. You can afford a few hours of sleep; you may get found out, but not by tomorrow morning."

"Why," asked Denny, "are you helping me? *Are* you helping me?"

"We'll see," said Pruitt. "First things first."

"Who else knows?" Denny asked this question while tucking into a bowl of goat stew. He had slept for eleven hours, then made excellent use of a bucket of hot water, a bar of soap, and Jesse Kellum's straight razor. Now he sat at the Hubbles' long, heavy table of dark wood, dressed in his last pieces of clean laundry from Louisville: a ratty pair of orange corduroys and a shapeless cotton sweatshirt with both elbows out.

"Search me. Maybe nobody. *I* know because...well, Humphrey would have a hard time deceiving me about anything, let alone anything this critical, even though he knew it would throw me into a quandary. I'm not sure he appreciates how much of one it does throw me into."

Eating steadily, Denny kept his focus. "So what are they up to?"

Pruitt propped her boots on the hearth, laced her fingers behind her head, and sighed heavily. She was a lean, severe-looking, rather mannish woman of forty or so, short brown hair mixed with gray. Denny thought her more attractive in person than in the holos and viddies he'd seen, not that that was saying a lot, but he no longer felt apprehensive about whether he could trust her; she was straightforward to the point of bluntness. "I've been trying to figure out how much to tell you. It would have been a lot better for you — for me too, come to that — if you hadn't

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been so pigheaded and intrepid about the damn bears. The reason I'm making this retreat right now is to try to get clear about how to handle what I know. Now I have to get clear about how to handle what *you* know, with no good answers coming through on either front so far."

Impatient with this dithering, Denny cut straight to the point. "Who put the baby Hefn in Rosetta's den?"

"I can tell you that. Humphrey did. It's not his baby, but he did the placement."

Alarmed, he demanded, "Did they tranquilize the mother?"

"I wouldn't know. Probably."

"Goddammit!" And then, "What did they do with Rocket? The other cub."

"I don't know that either. Gave him to a rehab outfit to raise as an orphan, most likely."

"That *sucks*." Furious, Denny pounded his fist on the table, rattling the spoon in his empty bowl. "Why'd they *do* that? Switch Rocket with the Hefn baby?"

"Why." Pruitt grimaced. "Sure you want to know? You'll be in even deeper."

"If they're messing with my bears, *yes* I want to know! Anyway, how can I get in any deeper than I'm in already?"

"Okay, then. I only just heard about this myself a month or so ago. It turns out," she said, "that the Hefn haven't been repairing the damage we did to the Earth entirely out of an altruistic desire to heal Earth's biosphere. It turns out that the Hefn and the Gafr — " she glanced at him, looked away. "It's like this. The Hefn and the Gafr aren't just connected in that master-servant sense we know about. They're also sexually symbiotic."

Denny's jaw dropped. "Symbiotic? Really?"

"Really. Genetically they're not even closely related, but neither can breed without the other. All the Hefn are male. All the Gafr are female. Everybody aboard that ship is, or was, part of a mated pair. The ship was looking for a place that was natural and unspoiled enough for them to breed in, because their home world, for some reason that hasn't been explained to me, is no longer a suitable place to do that in."

"They were looking for a place to *breed* when they found Earth?"

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"Right."

"Four hundred years ago?"

"Right."

"And they marooned the renegade Hefn here intending to come right back for them — and stay, and start reproducing! Only they had mechanical problems, and by the time they got back in 2006, Earth was no longer natural and unspoiled enough?"

"Right three times."

"Now we come to it." He shoved the bowl away and folded his arms on the table. "Why do they have to breed in the Garden of Eden?"

"I gather," Pruitt said slowly, "that the postnatal development of Hefn infants depends on spending a certain amount of time, at a certain stage, being raised in the wild by a predator. *As* a predator. By 2006 we no longer had a viable supply of nursemaid predatory species, and, not incidentally, we had way too many people."

"Oh my God." Denny, all biologist for the moment, looked thunderstruck. "That's fascinating. That's absolutely fascinating." He thought a minute. "Chimps? The big cats?"

Pruitt got up and cleared away his cup and bowl. She brought a basket of wrinkled-looking yellow apples to the table and thumped it down on the floor. "The big cats are all still pretty endangered in the wild, except for lions and cougars, and anyway the Hefn don't really relate to cats that well." She half-filled a bucket with water, brought that to the table too, and started transferring the apples to the bucket, where they bobbed peacefully. "Chimps might have been a possibility — there's a documented account that a group of them once adopted an abandoned Nigerian boy — but the Hefn needed to work with populations that could recover faster. Shorter gestation period, multiple births, briefer childhood, faster bounceback." She snorted. "I used to wonder why Humphrey was so interested in our myths and stories about feral children. When the Apprentices were kids in DC, he used to like to talk about that. Tarzan was a big thing of mine back then."

"Wolves!" Denny said. "Romulus and Remus. Mowgli. Those two girls in India. My God — the coyote field studies!"

Pruitt had removed the empty basket and fetched large bowls and paring knives and a section of newspaper, and now she sat down, spreading

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paper in front of her like a place mat. She nodded. "Yeah. They ruled out every species that hadn't been able to adapt to some degree to massive loss of habitat. Like tigers and chimps, wolves are too specialized. Coming back nicely *now*, of course...but coyotes were never in any danger of being exterminated, no matter how intensively they were hunted, trapped, poisoned — well, you know all this better than I do. The Hefn were very interested in the eastern coyotes, the big ones, for a while, but in the end they decided that black bears were a better answer." While she talked, Pruitt had been taking apples from the bucket, quartering and coring them on the newspaper, and tossing the pieces into one bowl and the cores and excised bad bits into another.

Denny drew a sheet of newspaper in front of himself and picked up a paring knife. "Bears aren't very good predators, though. They're fast, but not agile enough to prey on mature elk or deer, and as for rabbits and mice and like that, forget it." He reached into the bucket for an apple.

"In fact, not being specialized has worked to their advantage, and anyway they're apparently predatory enough for the purpose. And also," pitching a double handful of pieces into the bowl, "there's an authenticated account of a bear in Iran that carried off a toddler and nursed him for three days. Cross-species adoption, see, like the chimps and the Nigerian kid. Besides which, bears do exhibit one excellent behavior, if you're a Hefn."

Denny slapped the table. "They hibernate!"

"They hibernate. The only large mammalian predator that does, if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh man. You're saying — " Denny stared at Pruitt. "The Baby Ban. The Gaian Mission. All the habitat recovery projects. Think of everything the Gaians and the other eco-freaks have put up with, and *supported*, because we thought they were doing it to save the Earth — Gaia — and ultimately life on Earth, including human life. And all the time they were really doing it for themselves! This changes *everything!*"

Pruitt said unhappily, "It's not that black and white. I've been reevaluating everything I ever knew about the Hefn, believe me, these past few weeks. And I know — I *know* — there's been a real desire — definitely on Humphrey's part, and some of the other Observers too — to connect with people and help them — help them adjust — just *help* them."

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The apple in her hands was mostly rot; she abandoned the effort to cut out the bad parts and dumped the whole thing in the compost bowl. "But behind all that, yes, it does look like there was always another agenda, even for Humphrey and Godfrey and Alfrey. Because, whatever they think personally, and however earnestly some of them have intervened on our behalf, in the end the Hefn serve the Gafr. We tend to forget that, because we never see the Gafr, but it's all too true. All the Hefn we've had any contact with were loyal to the Gafr when the rebels fomented their mutiny."

Denny flung the knife down on the table so hard it skidded to the floor. "So that's been their purpose right from the start? Reduce-slash-eliminate the human population, the temperate forests and rainforest come back, the ecosystems are restored, the keystone predators return — and the aliens have a choice of breeding grounds. *Our* breeding grounds. Humans are sterilized so the aliens can have children. This isn't going to play well in Peoria," he said.

"No." Pruitt got up and dumped the bucket of water, now empty of apples, into the sink. She picked Denny's paring knife up off the floor and laid it on the counter, then went to build up the fire. "I think Humphrey really believed that the Ban would be lifted if things went well. Maybe the Gafr meant to lift it someday. But the whole deal has always hinged on connections between a few Hefn and a handful of people. Except for those relationships, the Gafr would have washed their hands of us long ago."

She stood, a bit stiffly, to lift a Dutch oven off the hearth and hang it on an iron arm affixed to the side of the fireplace. She removed the heavy lid and set it down. "All that's been kind of falling to pieces of late. The more frantic people get, the more reckless they get. Now that we've become so seriously endangered as a species ourselves, people naturally feel they have less and less to lose by defying the Hefn, and the Hefn have less and less reason to defend us to the Gafr. People are ready to explode even without knowing the Hefn and Gafr are breeding. If they find out — "

"Are you saying not to tell anybody?"

Pruitt shot him a startled look. "Were you going to? I thought you were looking for a bolt hole last night, not a reporter."

They stared at each other. Denny dropped his gaze. "I don't know what to do," he admitted. "I'm in danger of mindwipe because if I go public

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with this it could start a worldwide riot. But if I don't tell — I've never been able to stand the Hefn. If I don't expose them, I'll feel like a collaborator, or a coward, or both." He got up and carried the heaping bowl of quartered apples to the hearth. "The plain truth is, I *am* a collaborator, even if I didn't really know it. All the field biologists are. What have we been doing but helping get Earth's ecosystem ready to be an alien nursery?" He didn't state the obvious — that if he was a collaborator she was a thousand times worse — but he didn't need to.

Pruitt took the bowl and said, "I need about a cup of water." When Denny brought the water, she poured it into the Dutch oven, dumped in the apples, and stirred them briefly with a long wooden spoon. Then she clanged on the lid and swung the iron arm so the big pot hung over the fire. "Thanks," she said. "I owe Humphrey more than I owe to any human being now alive. But his patience with the people he's been trying to help has been strained to the limit. And, of course, he's utterly entranced with the thought of having a baby himself, his own baby. They've all been waiting for this for a very long time, fearing all that while that they would never breed again, that their kind would go extinct."

"So then they know exactly how *we* feel!"

Pruitt looked downright haggard. "Denny, I need to know what you're going to do. I doubt I can protect you if the Hefn find out what you know, even from Humphrey. What we need is a plan that will keep your paths from crossing."

"Well," said Denny, "when I get back from my leave — if I go back — Fish and Wildlife has offered me reassignment. Here, as a matter of fact. Outside the fence, I guess they mean."

"Here?" Pruitt sounded astonished.

"Mm-hm, it was Humphrey's idea. When I told him I was a Gaian and he was kicking me off my Ground, he apologized and said he'd try to get me reassigned to Hurt Hollow, which I guess he was thinking is every Gaian's Ground in a sense, as well as being yours, your own personal Ground. So if I don't go public, I guess that's what I'll be doing."

"Then I can tell you for a fact that Humphrey thinks the world of your work on the bears of Anderson County," said Pruitt, clearly impressed herself. "You have no idea what a compliment that offer is, coming from him. As a matter of fact, the upper part of the fence is about to come down.

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He wants bears to be able to get into Hurt Hollow. He wants his own son to be nurtured right here, right in the hottest Hot Spot of them all, and that sure isn't the best way I can think of to keep your paths from crossing."

A sharp bark came from outside; Pruitt walked over and opened the back door to let the dog in, along with a draft of cold air. "Wait a second," said Denny, throwing himself back onto the bench. "Hold everything. If the Hefn and Gafr are going to start having kids right and left, and placing them in bears' dens all over the map every winter, how long can the whole thing stay a secret? One baby Hefn, okay. But dozens? Hundreds? There's no way." Feste trotted around the room sniffing at things, then sat down in front of Denny, looking expectant. He rubbed the dog's ears absently and scratched under his chin.

Pruitt sat down on the bench across from him. "They'll post all the territories with signs threatening mindwipe — "

"People are getting more reckless, you said it yourself. Some other biologist is going to refuse to be kicked out, same as I did. There's no way they can keep the lid on. What if a bunch of Hefn toddlers come out in spring and start wandering around with the mother bears?" He leaned toward Pam. "What if somebody steals one out of a den? Or kills one? You know it could happen."

"If the Hefn weren't keeping close tabs on them all — "

"But they're not! Nobody's at my farm. Nobody was protecting the baby in Rosetta's den. You'd think they'd have the whole ship watching over it."

Pruitt rubbed her forehead, back and forth, as if trying to massage a headache away. "I guess keeping hands off, leaving it up to nature, might be a necessary part of Hefn child development." She looked at Denny, tense on his bench as a sprinter waiting for the gun. "Humphrey did say this had to happen in the wild, that zoos wouldn't work. If they could have kept a supply of captive apex predators on their ship, I don't suppose they'd have stuck around Earth."

"And I wouldn't be cowering here in dread of having my memory wiped."

"And the planet would still be going to hell in a handbasket."

"But it would still be ours."

Pruitt's eyebrows went up. "For how much longer?"

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Denny struck the table again. "You know what I think? I think we've been in a lose-lose situation all along here. I think if we'd been left to ourselves we'd either have poisoned and depleted the Earth beyond saving, or blown her up. Either way, extinction. And I think the Hefn have basically saved Earth's ecosystem, but for themselves, and they're going to force humanity into extinction anyway." He laughed, a harsh sound in the cozy little house. "At least this way Gaia herself survives. She'll do fine without us. As Gaians I guess we ought to be glad about that."

"Hard for a Hefn-hating Gaian wildlife biologist to know which end is up sometimes, yes?" And while Denny was still wondering how to take this spiteful-sounding crack, she added, "But right now, this morning, this minute, I'm thinking that you may have just hit the nail on the head." She shoved back her bench and stood up. "This retreat is over. I need to talk to Humphrey. And you need to get out of the Hollow. Humphrey knows this place like the back of his hand. If you don't want to go back to Fish and Wildlife you could hole up in my house in Salt Lake for a while — "

"I think I'll go back to Louisville," Denny said. "For now. I know some hidey-holes back there." And when Pruitt looked dubious, "Everything's happening too fast! A few weeks ago I was a field biologist, then I was a subversive, now all of a sudden I'm a fucking fugitive! Every time I think I've figured out what to do there's a news flash and I have to start figuring all over again. It's too crazy-making. I just want to go someplace quiet and think." Denny got up, took his filthy parka down from the hook where she had hung it, and put it on. He grabbed the straps of his duffel, and he was ready.

The fire had burned down to coals. Pruitt banked these with a little flat tool and gave the apples another stir. She stuck some papers, and some cheese and walnuts and a few other food items, into a small pack of her own, and put on her jacket. All through these preparations Denny could feel how she was bursting to argue with him, persuade him to keep the secret to himself, but all she said was, "Let's go, then. We row across to Indiana and catch the packet to Louisville." Opening the back door, she let Denny step out first into the damp, chilly, gray day, then followed the dog out and pulled the door to with a little bang. "I suppose we'll have to keep the house locked when the fence comes down." The thought made

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her grimace. "I'm going to the outhouse. You?" And when he shook his head, "Back in a minute then. Feste, sit. Stay."

Pruitt took three paces down the path — and directly ahead of her the view of leafless trees and steep hillside and Orrin Hubbell's studio began to spin. Denny shouted "Hey! Hey!" and dropped his bag. As they watched, the spinning air began to clarify from the center outward.

"Stay right where you are," said Pruitt. "It's a Time Window, opening from the future."

"What's going to happen?" Denny asked, tensed to run.

"To us? Nothing. Don't worry, whoever it is, all they can do is look through and talk." The bitterness had vanished from her voice; she sounded flustered but excited.

Denny was scared, but he was excited too. Ordinarily people didn't get to be on either side of a Time Window while it was actually working. All they ever saw were viddy recordings made through Time Windows, of historical events, edited by Temporal Physics technicians. This was raw footage, and he was in it — which might have been cause for panic, given his present situation, except — "How far in the future does a transceiver have to be to open a Window?"

"Theoretically, not far at all. In practice, it's impossible to set the coordinates if you're not pretty far down the road. Like trying to read something printed on the bridge of your nose."

Denny started to reply, but she waved her arm down to shut him up. The lens had clarified almost to the rim. At the center Denny saw a Hefn standing behind a strange metal contraption on legs, which he was obviously operating. Surrounding Hefn and transceiver, a disk of April — pink smears of blooming redbuds, fervent birdsong — had superimposed itself on the dead of winter.

The rim stopped spinning; the window was clear across its whole circumference. Stepping back from the machine, the Hefn came around where they could see him plainly.

Denny would have sworn he couldn't tell one Hefn from another, but he understood at once that this was neither Humphrey nor Innisfrey. This Hefn was sleeker somehow, slimmer, less motley-looking. His hyped-up brain would have arrived at the obvious in another moment, but the sleek Hefn did it for him. "Hi, Pam. Hi, Denny. Hey there, Feste, you look just

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like your great-great-grandnephews! Sorry to barge in on you like this. I'm Terrifrey, by the way. Humphrey's son."

Pruitt said quickly, "Where's Humphrey?"

"Hibernating. He was up most of the winter. He's fine, don't worry. We had to make the decision to contact you without consulting him, but he — preapproved it, so to speak."

"'We'?"

Terrifrey looked to the side, beyond the edge of the lens, and another Hefn came and stood next to him. "We," he said. "I'm Dennifrey. Named after you, Denny. Nice to see you."

Like a Time Window, Denny's mind whirled and cleared. "You're Rosetta's baby Hefn!" The Hefn nodded and beamed — or seemed to, since no Hefn could really do either. Instantly Denny said, "What happened to Rocket?"

"He lived a long, happy life and fathered lots of little Rockettes. And Rodeo and I were close as long as she lived. I went to see her all the time. She had lots of babies too."

"How do I know if you're telling me the truth, or telling me what I want to hear!" Denny protested.

"Oh, it's the truth, all right," said a third voice, and a wiry old man, nearly bald, with a bushy gray beard, strolled into the spring landscape and stood beside the two Hefn, a sight so unexpected, and so shocking, that Denny almost blurted out "Paw!" But his grandfather had been dead for years. He realized, with a dizzying lurch, that it was himself he was seeing.

The old man grinned at him, then beckoned in his turn, and the strangest figure of all entered the frame of the lens: a brown-haired girl of what, ten? eleven? Denny realized he couldn't remember what children had looked like at various ages, not that he'd ever paid that much attention. The girl was wearing a long blue dress and brown high-button shoes. "Hi, Grampa," she said, and giggled. The old man put his arm around her, but she had spoken through the lens, to Denny. "I'm Marny. I'm your granddaughter."

"My *grand*daughter!"

Pruitt broke in. "The Baby Ban's been lifted, then?"

The figures in the lens all hesitated and the girl looked sideways up

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at Terrifrey, who said carefully, "What you see, I'm afraid, is all you get. We can't answer any questions of that kind."

"That's the one answer I need," she said. "I've got to know."

"Well, it's just what we can't tell you," said Old Denny. "Not in so many words, because this — the four of us — is all I remember seeing in the Window. This is all that was shown to us. We had to take it from there as best we could."

Pruitt drew in a shaky breath. Denny said to the girl, "Are you really my granddaughter?"

Marny nodded vigorously. "You look really young. And you've got more hair, and it's dark. And no *beard*. This is weird." She giggled again.

"It's marvelous to see you both, but I'm sorry, we'll have to break contact now." Humphrey's self-declared son stepped back behind the transceiver. "Remember that Time is One. It'll be okay." And the disk of air spun inward while the others all waved, the alien and old man and the child, and in a few more seconds the wintry hillside had been restored to itself.

For a long moment Pruitt and Denny stood staring at the empty air. Then "Whuf," said Pruitt quietly. "I guess we're not going anywhere just yet. Except I'm still going to the outhouse. Back in a second." She pulled the door open. "Feste, in you go."

Denny picked up his bag and went in too. The house was filled with the heavenly aroma of cooking apples. In a daze he unzipped his coat and sat down. "My *grand*daughter!" he proclaimed to the black poodle, who turned around twice and slumped to the floor at his feet. And when Pruitt let herself in, "I'm gonna have a *granddaughter!*"

"Before you start knitting booties, Grampa," said Pruitt dryly, pulling off her pack and coat, "let's think a bit about what they *didn't* say."

Denny nodded. "That the Ban had been lifted. But there was Marny, Exhibit A!"

"They didn't say she hadn't been cloned. They didn't say she wasn't a child actor derived from one of the people who missed the Broadcast. They didn't say things had been worked out between us and the Gafr. They didn't, when you get right down to it, say a hell of a lot."

Denny thought, but had the presence of mind not to say, that another thing they hadn't explained was Pruitt's own absence from the tableau.

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(There could be lots of reasons for that, but the likeliest one was that she had died.) Instead he said, "But don't just dismiss what they did say: that she's my granddaughter. Do you think Humphrey's son would lie to you?"

"Who knows? Humphrey wouldn't, but Humphrey wasn't there." Pruitt's excitement had turned to letdown, but Denny felt himself refusing to allow that to affect him. "What year would you think it was in the Window?"

"You looked, what, about seventy? How old are you now?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Well then. Forty years, give or take. So 2078, 2080? Baby Ban plus or minus sixty-five. If the Ban hasn't been lifted, the youngest human generation is in its sixties and our fate has been decided."

"And if it has, things have worked out some way, and people are having babies again." His mind was still suffused with the image of the little girl in the long blue dress — far more preoccupied with that, in fact, than with the sight of himself as an old duffer, with its implied guarantee of a long life unblemished by mindwipe. A granddaughter! Necessitating a son or daughter in between!

An hour ago Denny would have said he had no interest whatever in children, that his fury at the Hefn for imposing the Ban was principled and impersonal. Now the very idea that this vision of the future might be true thrilled him so much, it was hard — no, impossible, right now! — to care about anything else. That humanity *had* a future, that he himself had a personal stake in it! The possibility this latest news flash — more of a bombshell, really — seemed to promise had changed his world again; he could feel himself being converted from cynicism to hopefulness, all the way through. "What did he mean about time is one?"

"It's a saying they have: 'Time is One, and Fixed.' It means that whatever happens is the only thing that *can* happen. If two Hefn and you and a little girl appear in a Time Window, then events will necessarily lead to a moment when a Time Window opens and those four beings speak to you and me on February 5, 2038."

"But then, no matter what we do, it'll work out that way. If I just go to bed for twenty years, that contact will still occur."

Pruitt lifted the lid of the Dutch oven and stirred the apples, letting out a cloud of fragrant steam, then came and sat on the bench next to

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Denny. "The Hefn have another saying: 'What we never know is how.' If a window opens in the future, they know of one little thing that will definitely happen, but not what else will happen between the present and that moment in the future. Maybe the 'how' is that you call a press conference and announce that the Hefn are reproducing, using bears as surrogate mothers. Maybe it's that you go back to work for Fish and Wildlife and get assigned here, and never say a word to anybody. Maybe you sneak back to have another look at baby Dennifrey and Humphrey catches you with your hand in the cookie jar, or you hide out in Utah and convert to Mormonism, or you go to bed for twenty years. You can say it doesn't matter, but you still have to choose among alternatives, see? And whatever you actually choose, *that* turns out to be 'how.' Your choice isn't determined by anything, but it's already there in the timestream."

Denny shook his head dubiously. "I don't really see why that's not determinism, but never mind. I'm making my choice. I'm choosing to believe that I'm really going to have a child and a grandchild, and that it means that up in the future where they are, human babies are being born, whether or not the Ban's been lifted. So for now, I'm deciding not to expose them. I'm going back to Fish and Wildlife and take the Hurt Hollow assignment, and wait and see." He looked straight into Pruitt's face, close to his own, her expression unreadable. "That's what you were hoping I'd do, right?"

"I'm not sure anymore."

The world seemed to have changed for her as well, but it wasn't Denny's problem. He stood and zipped his coat again. "You don't need to row me over; I'll walk back to Milton and catch the Louisville packet there. No big rush now." Despite saying this, he realized he couldn't wait to be off. He grabbed his duffel's straps with one hand and reached with the other for the door latch. "Thanks for everything. Will I see you when they send me back?"

Pruitt stood, dug in her pants pocket and pulled out a key on a ring. "Probably not. I'll need to be getting back to Salt Lake fairly soon. Here, take the gate key and let yourself out at the top of the path. Leave the key in the lock, I'll pick it up later."

"Well," said Denny, "thanks again."

"No problem. Good luck." She held out her hand.

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Denny gripped it. "I'll be in touch."

Outside he donned his pack and, feeling light as a milkweed parachute, bounded past the studio, across the bridge spanning the creek, and up the footpath he had last climbed as a boy of twelve. He felt like singing. He'd had absolutely no inkling that he cared so passionately whether his species did or didn't have a future, or whether he, as a biological organism, would be allowed to fulfill his own reproductive drive. The world had opened up, enormous with possibility.

HE WAS FITTING the key in the padlock when the sound of a chopper abruptly cut across these thoughts like a shock wave. In seconds he could see the thing, flying lower, turning—yes, landing, in the road; the cold blast from the propeller blades, beating just beyond the meshes of the fence, hit him in the face. For an instant he panicked; but then he saw his elderly self, standing in the Time Window with his arm around a little girl, and he closed the gate calmly and clicked the padlock shut.

Leaving the key in the lock as instructed, he turned toward the chopper. To his relief there seemed to be no one aboard but the pilot, who opened the passenger door and yelled, "Want a lift? I'm headed back to Louisville." It was that Somebody Hoffman, the woman who'd flown Humphrey to the farm the day his old world had collapsed. Denny ducked under the whirling blades, threw his duffel in, and climbed in after it. He strapped himself in and put on the headphones she handed him. "What are you doing here?"

"Dropping off Humphrey. Didn't you see him? He just got out. We spotted you coming up from the house and figured you'd been checking out Hurt Hollow from the bear-study perspective."

Denny grinned hugely. "Shrewd guess. That is exactly what I've been doing."

"If you've decided to go with that, you might want to reconsider."

"Why?"

"Tell you after takeoff." The chopper lifted off and the view of the Hollow spread out below them: steeply sloping hillsides of bare trees, kinking creek valleys, and, in another minute, Orrin Hubbell's house and studio, perched above the broad, winding, steel-colored Ohio River.

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Smoke floated from the chimney, and a tiny black dog danced back and forth on the shore, looking up and, no doubt, barking like anything. Inside, Pruitt would be putting the hot apple pulp through a colander. She must be wondering what the chopper was about, and half-prepared for Humphrey's imminent appearance. What would they say to each other, while Pruitt stirred in nutmeg and cinnamon and assembled her canning paraphernalia? Denny squinted into the leafless woods, but caught no glimpse of a Hefn descending the bluff.

The chopper banked left and straightened out, following the river downstream. Somebody Hoffman settled back in her seat. "I don't guess you've heard about the bombings."

Jerked back to the here and now, Denny said "Bombings? No! What bombings?"

"It's on all the newscasts. Terrorists blew up the headquarters of the Bureau of Temporal Physics in Santa Barbara last night. Also Senator Carpenter's office in the Congressional Office Building — he's chair of the Committee on Alien Affairs, I guess you knew that? The bombs were synchronized to go off at one and four in the morning, so there were no fatalities and not many injuries, but they sure made a mess."

"Who did it?"

"A group calling itself Collaboration Zero. They issued a statement calling on every human being presently helping or cooperating with the Hefn in any way to quit doing that. They want people to quit voluntarily, but whoever refuses to, they say they're prepared to go to any lengths to stop them. Anybody they consider a collaborator, at every level of collaboration, will be a target. They're claiming there are hundreds of resistance fighters, that the Hefn will never find them, and that this was a warning shot to convince everybody they can do what they say."

"My God." A literal chill went through him. "If they can decide who's a collaborator, it's a witch hunt." It struck him that the Time Window had opened on this day because of what he was hearing now, that he had been shown the future before learning about the present. But why? The sense of being thrown into uncertainty yet again made him feel almost frantic.

"Yeah, and you and I are the witches," the pilot was saying. "And besides that, they specifically named the Gaians as a group; they're ordering all the missions to terminate their alliance with the Hefn and

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operate independently. Humphrey didn't say so, but I bet that's why he flew up here today. If those people know Pruitt's here at Hurt Hollow, they might be coming for her. They could be anywhere."

"But how many of these dudes can there really be?" Denny protested. "They can't possibly do all that much damage if they stay undercover, plus security will be a lot tighter wherever there's a potential target. Unless they're suicide troops. Jesus," he said, "I'm having trouble taking this in."

"They're clever," replied the pilot — Marian, that was her name. "Technically, by targeting the collaborators instead of the Hefn themselves, they're not violating the Directive. They explicitly said they didn't intend to harm the Hefn, or break any Directive rules about transportation or the production and distribution of food or any of that. And the Gaians can go right on doing most of what they do. But if you're a human being who helps the Hefn do what *they* do, and if you go on helping them after today, look out." She glanced over at Denny. "There don't have to be that many of them to scare the living daylights out of people. Today is my last day flying this thing for Fish and Wildlife, I can tell you that, and I wouldn't be that keen to study bears in Hurt Hollow either."

"Who *are* they, though? What are they trying to accomplish?" With part of his mind Denny was trying, unsuccessfully, to make this new upset fit with the vision he'd been given. "I don't see the logic of it," he said, meaning both things.

"Me neither, which is why I've started to wonder if this is maybe not so much about the Baby Ban, as just about standing up to the Hefn."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you know — striking a blow for human self-respect. I mean, you're right, as a way to get the Ban lifted it makes no sense. But as a way to get people to stop cooperating with the Hefn — give them an *excuse* to stop, because in a lot of cases people would love to have an excuse — it kind of does. And let's face it, how likely is it at this point that the Ban's ever going to end?"

Denny tried to focus his whirling thoughts. "Wait. You mean, like, if I quit studying bears because I refuse to work for the Hefn, they're down on me. But if I quit because my life's been threatened...?"

"That's it. Like, I told Humphrey on the way up here that I'm probably

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going to have to quit flying, because my mother would worry herself sick, and he seemed to accept that at face value."

It did make a kind of sense, but — "But I don't want to quit studying bears! God knows, I'd far *rather* do it without Hefn supervision; but one way or another, I bloody well want to keep on doing it!"

Especially now.

He pictured a pipe bomb going off in the middle of the night, blowing the Hubbells' cabin to smithereens with him in it. Then he pictured himself in the Time Window, an old man, his arm around a girl in a blue dress, and calmed down. Whatever happened he wasn't going to die anytime soon, a victim of Collaboration Zero.

" — your business," Marian was saying. "But I'm going to find out who they are if I can, and what they're really up to."

They could see Louisville in the distance now. "How do you figure on doing that?"

She shrugged. "Search me. I don't know yet, but I've got a few ideas."

Denny snorted. "And you think working for the Hefn is too dangerous!" But an idea was forming in his mind as it struggled to process Marian's hypothesis. "These Collaboration Zero guys, you know, they could be just what they look like. A terrorist gang. But even if it's not what *they* have in mind...mightn't it be possible to cripple the Hefn without putting everybody at risk of mindwipe, by giving people a pretext to quit working for them? I mean, we don't have to *help* the bastards take us out! You're for sure dead right about what it would do for our self-respect, too, to stop cringing and groveling in the pathetic hope that the Baby Ban will be lifted someday."

"Exactly. A kick in the butt. Something to shock us into realizing that even if we can't do anything about the Baby Ban, we've still got options." She glanced over at him. "If I find out, want me to get in touch?"

"Yeah, I do, sure."

"Where?"

"Hurt Hollow." I'll sort out the contradictions later, he thought. Somehow, I belong on both sides of this fence.

She made a wry face. "Okay, if Hurt Hollow hasn't exploded, bears and all, by the time I get back to you."

"And if nobody's put a contract out on *you*."

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They grinned at each other, excited and stirred by new possibilities. The chopper was losing altitude now, homing in on the city. "Of course, the Gafr could still obliterate us," Marian said. "Or just leave, and come back in fifty years."

Denny thought of the baby Hefn in Rosetta's den. "They won't do either of those things," he said with certainty. "It's too late to deal with us like that." A watery Sun had come out. As Denny twisted and craned to watch the chopper's shadow skim the river, an object in a sling behind the pilot's seat caught his eye. "Whoa — is that a diskorder back there?"

"Yep. Standard equipment on Fish and Wildlife helicopters."

"Is it loaded?

"Supposed to be. Why?"

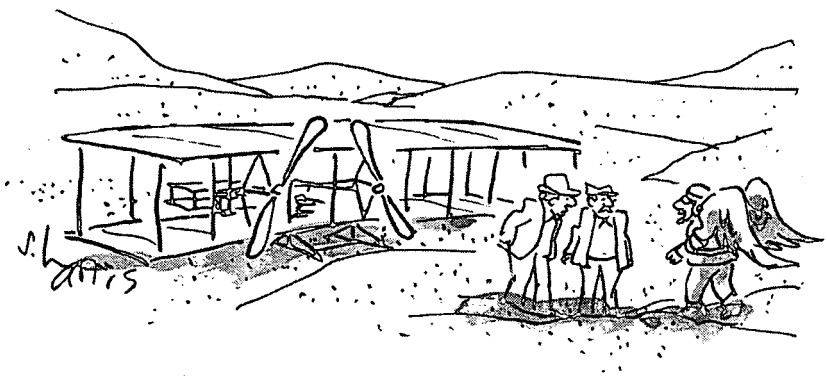
"Listen," said Denny, "this being your last day and all, how about taking a little detour, while everybody's focused on California and D.C., and flying me out to my farm?"

Marian frowned. "What for? If Humphrey or Innisfrey find out, we're buzzard meat."

"Something I really need to do, in case I ever join the Resistance. No kidding, it's really important."

"What could be that important?" But her hands moved on the controls and the chopper tilted and started to climb to the left.

"Or start the Resistance," he said, "the real one."



"Boys, you're barking up the wrong tree."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Coyote Cowgirl, by Kim Antieau, Forge Books, 2003, $24.95.

LET ME GET my bias out of the way first: I got to read this book in manuscript form before it had found a publisher, and I loved it so much that I spent the next couple of years trying to find a home for it. There was nothing wrong with the book — it just didn't fit neatly into any category, which meant that a publisher would have to take a chance that it would find an audience.

Every editor who saw it loved it as much as I do, but didn't know what to do with it, until at last, Forge Books has stepped up with this handsome edition and I can finally buy multiple copies to hand around to all and sundry in my own circle of friends.

(And just for the record, no, I don't stand to benefit from its publication, except for the joy of finally seeing it in print.)

So what's it about? Allow me to quote from some publicity material that does a much more succinct job than I could of describing it: "While chasing stolen family treasures, Jeanne Les Flambeaux — of the famous Flambeaux chefs and restaurateurs of the Southwest — stumbles across a closet full of family skeletons — not to mention Crane, a talking crystal skull who may hold the key to the biggest secrets of all: why Jeanne won't eat, can't cook, and doesn't belong anywhere. Then Jeanne stops at La Magia restaurant in the little town of Sosegado, Arizona, and soon everyone comes to taste her food — and the truth."

What a plot summary doesn't begin to do is describe the sheer joy of Antieau's prose, which manages to be light-hearted, serious, lyrical, and down-to-earth all at the same time. The characters — especially Jeanne — are a joy, as well; larger than life, but at the same time, as familiar as our own family and friends.

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Rereading the book, I can well understand the confusion many editors had in trying to categorize it. Is it a thriller? (There's a serial killer on the loose in its pages.) A comedy? (There are some *very* funny moments.) A mystical romance? (You'll find elements of both.) A fantasy? (I mean, a talking skull....) A road book? (And what a journey Jeanne and Crane take!) A culinary delight? (You'll find recipes in here, and you'll probably get hungry as you're reading.) A coming-of-age novel, an exploration of the human condition?

I could go on, but let me simply say *Coyote Cowgirl* is all of these and more. It's a sexy, serious, and very fun romp of a book, and one of my all-time favorites — a novel that I've reread many times already, and will certainly be reading again. Do yourself a favor and give it a try.

The Blind Mirror, by Christopher Pike, Tor Books, 2003, $24.95.

Christopher Pike's latest novel starts off with an intriguing premise, one that becomes more absorbing the further one gets into the story. When *The Blind Mirror* opens, aspiring book-cover artist David Lennon is still recovering from the sudden end of his relationship with a woman named Sienna two months before. They were together for half a year, and it's not until she unceremoniously dumps him — one night around midnight, on a secluded California beach — that Lennon realizes how little he really knew about her.

Still hurting, Lennon has just arrived in from New York, where he's gotten his first book cover commission. Driving home from the airport, he makes a detour back to the beach where Sienna broke up with him, only to find the decomposing body of a dead woman who was ritually killed.

Not long into the local police's investigation, the FBI is brought in and Lennon finds himself arrested for the murder of his ex-girlfriend. Lennon doesn't understand. The dead woman is blonde, Sienna was a brunette. And he's been receiving phone calls from Sienna since he got back, so she has to be alive.

The trouble is, he can't prove it, and forensic evidence says the dead woman is Sienna. Messages left on his answering machine by Sienna mysteriously disappear. The local sheriff is sympathetic, but convinced of his guilt. The FBI agent doesn't think Lennon's guilty, but he appears to have an agenda of his

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own which doesn't include helping Lennon. And to make matters still worse, Lennon isn't entirely clear himself what exactly happened on that last night he spent with Sienna.

The more Lennon investigates, the more complicated and *weird* things get. And then, when the case begins to show ties to a pair of suicides that occurred ten years previously, events really begin to spin out of control.

Pike has a flair for this kind of thriller. His prose is smooth, his pacing brisk. And I particularly liked the ambiguity of whether or not Lennon's problems have a supernatural origin. Pike also has some fun occasionally cutting to sections of the book for which Lennon has been commissioned to provide the cover art, and ties its story neatly into the main narrative.

But I have to admit that by the time everything started to come together, the plot connections were beginning to stretch my credulity. And this is a bleak book, especially as you get to the end. But that's just my take. Your own experience could well be different, especially if you like a good mystery to puzzle out, and don't mind it taking you to some very dark places along the way.

The Spiderwick Chronicles, Book 1: The Field Guide, by Tony DiTerlizzi & Holly Black, Simon &Schuster, 2003, $9.95.

The Spiderwick Chronicles, Book 2: The Seeing Stone, by Tony DiTerlizzi & Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, 2003, $9.95.

In the wake of Harry Potter's continuing popularity, it seems that every publisher is starting up a YA line. Simon & Schuster's main entry is the five-book series *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, a charming story of three children who, when their mother moves them into their weird aunt's old falling-down Victorian house, stumble into the world of Fairy.

DiTerlizzi and Black get equal billing on the cover and title page. I'm guessing that they plotted the story together, then DiTerlizzi provided the wonderful illustrations while Black was responsible for the prose.

Readers of this column might remember me raving about Black's debut novel *Tithe*, an edgy, punk take on the world of Fairy colliding with ours. She did it so well, I was wondering how she'd handle a gentler tale, but I shouldn't have worried. Her youthful characters move

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through the story with that splendid awkward grace of children. You might recognize some of your own childhoods in how Jared, Mallory, and Simon deal with a broken home, troubles at school, bickering siblings, and a worried mother.

With that in mind, just try imagining how you'd also have dealt with packs of kidnapping goblins, trolls, and the like. I don't know how well we'd cope. But the Grace children certainly do.

Black proves to have a gift of writing young characters that are true to life while also creating an inventive, magical world with which they can interact, a world both dark and whimsical. And I especially like that she didn't feel it necessary to take the almost mean-spirited, tongue-in-cheek mocking tone that can be found in the works of some other recent claimants to the high position Rowling holds in the hearts of her readers.

These books have a modern sensibility, but while reading them I was reminded of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* books (although *The Spiderwick Chronicles* are much better written) which I loved as a kid. Or perhaps a better comparison would be to Arthur Ransome's work — adding in fairies, of course.

And then there are DiTerlizzi's engaging illustrations. They're mostly black-and-white line drawings that perfectly capture the characters' youthfulness and the necessary mix of real world and Fairy.

These are such wonderful little books that I don't even mind the fact that by the time all five have been published, my wallet will have been set back almost fifty dollars. I just wish that they'd all come out in one volume. Not so much for the savings, but because I really want to know what happens next!

Orbiter, by Warren Ellis & Colleen Doran, Vertigo/DC, 2003. $24.95.

Probably the one genre that almost always gets short shrift when it comes to the graphic novel format is sf. Pretty much any time a comic book's described as sf, you can be sure that it's going to be a space adventure like *Star Wars*, featuring weird, bug-eyed aliens and whatever other stereotypes the creators can stuff into its pages. Thoughtful, *speculative* stories? Those are few and far between.

But occasionally they get it right, and that's the case here with Ellis and Doran's *Orbiter*. It's set in the near future, ten years after the

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mysterious disappearance of the space shuttle *Venture* closes down the manned space flights program at NASA. But then that shuttle reappears, landing in the shanty town that's grown up around the Kennedy Space Center.

It's an impossible situation to start with that just gets stranger as a team of specialists is brought in to study the shuttle and the one catatonic crew member who returned with it. Because the more they uncover, the deeper the puzzles get. The *Venture* has new engines and instrumentation. It's covered with what appears to be skin. It has Martian sand in its landing gears. And when the pilot is finally able to speak, his explanation sounds like deep-space dementia.

The mystery of what happened to the shuttle and its crew is a novel, to quote the jacket copy, "about why we go to space...and what's waiting for us out there."

And when that mystery is resolved, it's a pure delight. But what I really appreciate about this book is how everything is solidly based on logic. The building blocks of story grow out of what we presently know about physics, mechanics, and space.

In other words, real sf.

Orbiter is easily one of the more thoughtful sf stories I've read in some time, in any format.

The Face, by Dean Koontz, Bantam Books, 2003, $26.95.

It was a treat to have this arrive in my P.O. Box — a new Koontz novel just six months after the last one. He's beginning to give Stephen King a run for his money in terms of how many books he has out in a year.

But what makes this new novel more of a treat is how different it is from his work of late. Koontz has developed a wonderful tone with his thrillers in the past few years, injecting them with a generous dose of humor while never letting up on the tension that a good thriller requires. In *The Face* he takes a much more serious tone, which, in turn, helps up the level of anxiety that his readers feel for his characters.

This time out we're rooting for Ethan Truman, an ex-cop who now provides security for one of the top box-office actors in Hollywood, Channing Manheim, "the Face of the new millennium." Truman is still mourning his deceased wife Hannah, who died five years earlier. When the book opens, he's puzzling over a series of mysterious threatening objects and notes that

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have arrived at Manheim's L.A. mansion. Truman doesn't particularly like Manheim, but that doesn't mean he won't do everything in his power to protect his employer.

We're also sympathetic to Manheim's son Fric, a skinny ten-year-old asthmatic who bears no resemblance to his screen idol father, or to his supermodel mother, neither of whom spend any time with him. While he's fascinated by the public and screen image of what he calls his "Ghost Dad," his own social interactions are with his father's staff and the odd bimbo girlfriend Manheim brings by the mansion.

The last main point-of-view character is the anarchist Corky Laputa, who is responsible for the mysterious threats that Truman has intercepted. Except his target, unbeknownst to Truman, isn't Manheim, but Manheim's son Fric.

Also on stage are Truman's ex-partner in the LAPD, Hazard Yancy, and Truman's childhood friend, Dunny Whistler, an ex-gangster friend who died in the midst of trying to make good for his life of crime, but still seems to manage to get around just fine.

Truman begins to have bizarre hallucinations of his own death, Fric gets a series of strange phone calls that warn more than threaten, Laputa is about to launch his attack, and the lives of all five characters are soon closing in on an inevitable collision with one another. The pay-off is full of tension — and also full of surprises.

As is usual in his work, Koontz introduces us to some of the most despicable characters we might imagine, while also leaving us with a sense of hope. In addition, this time he shows us how redemption can be earned, even for the worst of us.

And as a nice finishing touch, it's not until the end of the book that we realize the title refers to something other than movie idol Manheim.

Creepy Little Bedtime Stories, by Madame M, Creepy Little Productions, 2001, $18.95.

There will probably always be a market for children's books that lean toward the weird and the eerie. You have only to consider the continuing popularity of Edward Gorey's strange little illustrated books, or take a stroll through the children's section in your local bookstore.

At a recent convention in

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Phoenix, Arizona, I came across a new entry to the field, two books by Madame M (AKA Christy A. Moeller-Masel): the title being discussed here (which I picked up and read) and a second volume of illustrated poems entitled *Eerie Little Bedtime Stories* (which I left behind on the table for no reason beyond the fact I simply wanted to try the books, and one seemed enough for that purpose).

The horror factor is mostly gentle, geared toward being read aloud to younger children, who will undoubtedly grin at the weird and wonderful illustrations and demand repeat readings of the verses. But adults will also get a smile or two at these stories of "The Headless Girl" (whose head goes night-clubbing while her body is sleeping), "Wolfman Joe" (wherein we discover the true cause of lycanthropy), the rock star born without hips in "Johnny Is a Rock Star," and the other curious people and creatures to be found in these pages.

Copies of both books can be ordered at *www.creepylittlestories.com* where you'll also find samples of Madame M's wares.

Marc Bolan: The Bopping Elf, by Catherine Lambert & Michel Laverdière, Beltania/S.R.I. Canada, 2003 Cdn$21.99.

This odd hybrid of book and music will probably be of more interest to genre readers because of the possibilities it offers for mixed media presentations, than for the predilection Marc Bolan had for elves and fantasy (both of which informed his first five or six albums, before his glam rock career took over and he became — for a time, mostly in the U.K. and Japan — as big as the Beatles).

To be honest, the two-CD set is a bit of a mess.

I quite enjoyed the jaunty rhythms and half-decipherable lyrics of Bolan's early recordings as Tyrannosaurus Rex in the way back when, and continued to do so when he shortened the band name to simply T. Rex. They had an exuberance and innocence — not to mention a happy strangeness — when compared with the other music available at the tail end of the sixties. Which begs the question: Why would anyone do mock-early music consort settings of those same, rather earthy songs, versions that so prettify the songs that they lose all their grit? Catherine Lambert (the singer here) has a lovely, clear voice, but part of what made Bolan's

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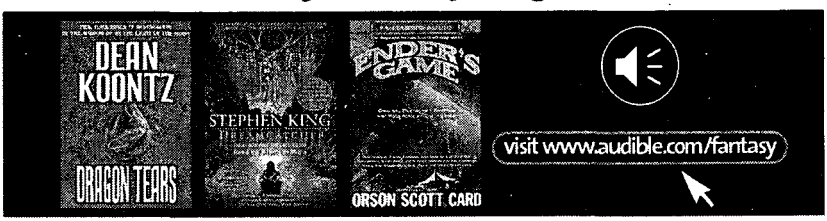

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early work so fascinating was the airiness of fairy mixed with the songs' hard-driving, if acoustic, rhythms.

All that is gone in this recording. If this is the music of Fairyland, point me to the nearest rave to clear it from my head.

But if the music leans more toward twee, the two books on the accompanying CD-Rom don't add much grit to the mix either. *The Bopping Elf* is a "biography" of Bolan, "written" by an elf named Poon of the Hills, and it attempts to retell Bolan's story as though he, too, were an elf, visiting the human world. (Here the author is pretending to be the statue of an elf that used to stand on Bolan's mantelpiece — a statue Bolan claimed inspired his work.) *The Gospel According to Marc Bolan* is written by Michel Laverdière under his own name, and it's his take on the philosophy to be found in Bolan's work.

Now it's obvious that Laverdière cares about Bolan's work, is sincere in his love for it, and hopes to present it to a larger audience. But this isn't the way to go about it. I'd say these books were only for devotees of Bolan's work, but while I still enjoy those early albums, this project by Laverdière and Lambert

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only makes me feel embarrassed to admit it.

So if it's so misguided, why discuss this project at all?

Well, first off, Bolan built up a considerable fantasy mythology with his early work: in the songs, of course, but also in stories such as the spoken preamble to "Romany Soup," his book *The Warlock of Love*, and in the full-length version of his "The Children of Rarn" suite. This material could benefit from a closer study, or at least some exploration by lovers of fantasy. But presented as they are here, the music (watered-down versions of the songs more suited to a classical music audience than one that likes to rock — and Bolan did like to rock) and the books (simply too earnest) will put off more people than they will draw to Bolan's work.

Secondly, this two-disk set shows, by example, how something wonderful could be put together: creative presentations mixing music, prose, and illustrations, all in one neat and tidy package. Don't want to read on your computer? The book files on the CD-Rom disc come in a number of formats and with the freeware that's readily available on the net, it's easy to translate the Word.doc files into formats that can effortlessly be read on a handheld device such as a Palm or an iPaq (check *www.peanutpress.com* for a simple, free translation program).

Those same handheld computers can also handle images, and MP3s of the music that you could listen to while you read, so you wouldn't need to be locked to your desk computer, or balancing an unwieldy laptop, to get the full visual and audio experience.

Marc Bolan: The Bopping Elf proves that the potential exists for some truly interesting mixed media presentations. All that's needed is some stronger content.

Readers interested in more about Bolan might want to check out the fan site *www.tilldawn.net*. Copies of this CD-Rom/CD set can be ordered from *www.xxi-21.com*.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Circle of Doom, by Tim Kennemore, pictures by Tim Archbold, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, $16.

Sorcery & Cecelia, or, the Enchanted Chocolate Pot, by Patricia C. Wrede & Caroline Stevermer, Harcourt, Inc., 2003, $17.

Keys to the Kingdom Book One: Mister Monday, by Garth Nix, Scholastic, 2003, $5.99.

The Wonder Clock, written & illustrated by Howard Pyle, Starscape, 2003, $5.99.

Rootabaga Stories and *More Rootabaga Stories*, by Carl Sandburg, illustrated by Maud & Miska Petersham, Harcourt, Inc., 2003, $17.

THE KIN OF POTTER ARE WAITING FOR YOU

A long time ago, in a library far, far away, there were no summer books for children; at least not the sort of books we liked to read. Well, maybe there were a few, but they were squirreled away and one had to search them out. Some — *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Once and Future King* — were in with the adult books. Others — *The Worm Ouroborus*, *Lud-in-the-Mist*, *The Moon Pool*, *The Island of the Mighty* — we eventually discovered in places other than the library.

But these books weren't *meant* for children. To find the kind of children's book we liked to read, one had to stand on a bench in front of tottering shelves that buckled beneath the weight of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames and *The Little Lame Prince* and *Maida's Little Camp* and many, many stories about valiant collies. *Maida's Little Camp* was not bad, if you had never read a book before, and the adventures of the collies were thrilling as long as one was too young not to notice the fetid taint of racism that clung to them.

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Still, none of these were vacation books, which were books like *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* and *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Hobbit* and *The Book of Three, Elidor* and *The Moon of Gomrath, Five Children and It,* and *Half Magic* and *Over Sea, Under Stone* — the kind of book that could distill an entire summer into a few hundred pages, the kind of book that can still summon up memories of hammocks and peach ice cream and the scent of lilacs, even if you actually first read them in a damp attic room smelling of wet sheetrock and ant traps.

In those days, there was a real joy in discovering a new fantasy novel, because there were so few of them. The Tolkien tsunami was just gathering speed out in the vast ocean of mid-to-late-1960s literature; C. S. Lewis was a bestselling theologian whose Narnia books were a quaint eccentricity, and one did not mention his science fiction trilogy (or even the word "trilogy") in polite company. Even Joan Aiken, whose children's books now fill entire libraries, had only written three volumes of Dido Twite's adventures. (To give you an idea of how sparse the field was back then, an official list compiled by the Westchester County Library System suggested that children who enjoyed *The Hobbit* might also enjoy *Animal Farm* and *Rootabaga Stories.* We did, but we enjoyed *A Wizard of Earthsea* more.) One reason we read these books over and over and over again is that there simply weren't enough of them. Now of course there are too many.

Well, maybe not too many. This is a Golden Age for children's fantasy, as it is for New Weird fiction in general. Ever since the arrival of Harry Potter a few years ago, YA fantasy publishing has burgeoned, hydra-like: a reviewer has only finished reading one novel when more appear in its place (Christopher Paolini's much-touted debut, *Eragon,* just arrived in this morning's post). Sturgeon's Law dictates that ninety percent of these are crap; another law suggests that a number are reprints, and we can assume that some are crappy reprints. That still leaves a lot of books.

Happily, at least one is a keeper. The English novelist Tim Kennemore's *Circle of Doom* is a droll, sideways fantasy about the Sharp family: thirteen-year-old Lizzie, an aspiring witch; ten-year-old Dan, skeptical of his older sister's powers; and seven-year-old Max, willing

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to believe anything, if only someone would pay attention to him; "He had only just worked out answering machines, and still couldn't understand fax machines, which seemed excellent evidence that magic was everywhere."

The thistledown plot floats around the siblings' wish that a family with children would move into the house across the road, until recently occupied by the grumpy, unpleasant Potwards, "the sort of people who turned the lights out and pretended to be out if they heard carol singers approaching." To this end, Lizzie concocts a spell, complete with disgusting potion. To everyone's astonishment, the spell works: Mrs. Potward falls and breaks her hip, whereupon she and her husband are promptly bundled off to a nursing home. Lizzie, unlike Harry Potter's distaff sidekick Hermione, promptly sets about doing what any real, redblooded teenager would do if she had magical powers: she becomes a maniacal consumer.

> There were so many things she wanted! She already had a small television in her room but she could really do with a video as well, and a DVD player. She wanted a personal CD player (anti-shock, rechargeable) and several dozen new CDs. She wanted a cell phone and an entire wardrobe of new clothes. She wanted tickets to see several bands live, a long weekend at AltonTowers, and a fortnight in the Caribbean..... She wanted her own bathroom (with Jacuzzi), a pet snake, and a Rolls-Royce with her own chauffeur. She wanted a swimming pool and she wanted to be on TV *absolutely all the time.*

Lizzie also covets a very beautiful star-spangled duvet in Westalls department store — "absolutely perfect for an apprentice witch in every way" — and has already come up with a very good way to explain its appearance to her mother: "she would say that her school is doing a Sponsored Duvet Swap for the Homeless."

Kennemore's is-she-or-isn't-she-really-magic tone in *Circle of Doom* evokes that of E. Nesbit and Edward Eager, who wrote "straight" children's books that still managed to retain the charm and exuberance of their fantasies. I'm thinking of Nesbit's classic *The Story of the Treasure Seekers, Being the Adventures*

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of the Bastable Children in Search of a Fortune, and Eager's *Magic or Not?* and *The Well-Wishers* (admittedly not his best work). Both Nesbit and Eager had an amazing ability to capture the way real children talk and act — the Bastables, knickers and pinafores notwithstanding, could hold their own in any contemporary shopping mall gaming arcade; ditto Eager's Eisenhower-era protagonists.

Kennemore has this gift in spades, as well as a refreshingly non-p.c. lack of sentiment: after Lizzie's spell seemingly causes her physics teacher to throw up during class, the fledging witch, at Dan's instigation, attempts to exorcise poor Max's imaginary friends.

Both Lizzie and Dan end up feeling bad about this, but by then Max has taken matters into his own hands. He creates his own potion, to use on a school bully, with lager as a prime ingredient (chilled white wine has been put to good use earlier). The results are hilarious, *Harry Potter* channeled through *Ab Fab*. Kennemore takes several good-natured and very funny swipes at drab old Harry, especially with a huge family of red-haired children called the Dursleys, the youngest of whom quickly develops a crush on the youngest Cleve.

"Max poisoned my brother Nathan," said Ruth Dursley, gazing at Max with open admiration.

"Don't you *like* Nathan?" Max asked her. "I mean, he's your *brother*."

Ruth pulled a disgusted face. "Nobody does. My mum says he's a little sod and he's going to turn out just like his father."

Lizzie doesn't quite end up being a celebrity witch on TV all the time, but readers may wish she had. *Circle of Doom* is a funny, warm page-turner, the perfect summer book. I'm going to give copies to all the kids I know; hammocks optional.

Somewhere, someone has an Emenee Write-O-Matic that deals with the age-old problem of coming up with new twists on very old literary tropes. Patricia C. Wrede and Caroline Stevermer have obviously gotten hold of one of these useful gadgets. Their clever new novel, *Sorcery & Cecelia*, neatly dovetails two hoary genres, fantasy and Regency romance, into a tale that is equal parts Jane Austen and J. K. Rowling. It's England in 1817: teenage Cecelia is stuck at home at

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Rushton Manor, while her cousin Kate is enjoying the spring Season at Berkeley Square. All seems firmly planted within the realm of The Fields We Know, or at least of The Fields Georgette Heyer Knew, until we learn that part of Kate's coming-out involves her attendance at Sir Hilary Bedrick's investiture at the Royal College of Wizards.

Gadzooks! Before you can finish embroidering that Empire waistline, the two cousins are embroiled in enough skullduggery, romance, eldritch doings, and general hugger-mugger to get them through a dozen Seasons, and not just one. I've never developed a taste for Regency literature — the constant social whirl makes my head spin — but *Sorcery & Cecelia* charmed me, even if I did have trouble keeping the big cast of characters straight and recalling who was in London and who in Essex.

Wrede and Stevermer acknowledge their debt to Ellen Kushner, whose 1987 novel *Swordspoint* reinvigorated sword and sorcery by giving it an elegant early-eighteenth-century gloss, and fans of Kushner and Delia Sherman's very fine *The Fall of the Kings* will certainly embrace *Sorcery & Cecelia* as well. I must confess, however, that my very favorite part of the book was the delightful Afterword, where the authors reveal that their novel grew out of something called the Letter Game (or Persona Letters, or Ghost Letters), wherein two people write to each other, each taking on an imaginary character but never revealing the "plot" of their epistolary escapades. Kushner first introduced Stevermer to the game, and in 1986 Stevermer taught it to Wrede. The two then embarked upon their imaginary correspondence, Wrede writing as Cecelia and Stevermer as Kate; their letters seem to have traced roughly the same chronological arc as their fictional counterparts', beginning in April and ending as summer has begun to wane. The letters were eventually edited and now, happily, published. Ambitious young email writers, take note! There is an entire subgenre waiting to be colonized!

Garth Nix, author of the best-selling *Seventh Tower* books as well as the novels *Sabriel, Lirael,* and *Abhorsen,* has a new series, *The Keys to the Kingdom.* Book One, *Mister Monday,* gets the series off to a lackluster start. A confusing Prologue jutters into a clunky opening chapter —

> It was Arthur Penhaligon's first day at his new school and

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it was not going well. Having to start two weeks after everyone else was bad enough, but it was even worse than that. Arthur was totally and utterly new to the school. His family had just moved to the town, so he knew absolutely no one, and he had none of the local knowledge that would make life easier.

Not only is Arthur absolutely, utterly, totally alone, he has asthma and doesn't seem to have ever been taught how to use his medication properly (as an asthmatic and the parent of an asthmatic, I found this *extremely* annoying) — not since *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* has an inhaler been so exploited as a plot twist (though I'm told that I should see the movie *Signs)*. Nix's overly complex narrative involves the irruption upon our world of a House made of Time, which only Arthur, heir to the titular Keys, can see. Arthur must defeat the Fetchers, dogfaced men in bowler hats who smell of rotting meat and spread a deadly sleeping plague, and assume his full powers as Master of the Keys and upholder of the Original Law.

There are many nice touches — the strange house and its inhabitants; mysterious characters named Dawn, Dusk, and Noon, as well as Mister Monday himself; a city whose commerce is driven by the exchange of paper; a school librarian who is the only adult who senses something is wrong when Arthur's school is under attack by the Fetchers, invisible to everyone save himself. One lovely, brief scene has luminous elevators transferring hundreds of nightwatchers during shift change, and the deadly plagues that have devastated Arthur Penhaligon's world have ominous relevance in light of our own SARS epidemic. But the mix of fantastic elements with vaguely science fiction ones is jarring and never quite meshes as it should.

The influence of the formidable Neil Gaiman is everywhere here, especially his *Books of Magic.* Arthur, as depicted in *Mister Monday*'s beautiful, eerie cover art, even looks like Tim Hunter, the protagonist of *The Books of Magic* (and come to think of it, Harry Potter resembles Tim Hunter, too). Gaiman's prodigious knowledge of, and love for, fantastic literature informs all his work, but never overpowers it. Nix seems to borrow ruthlessly without ever making the leap from pastiche to homage, and his

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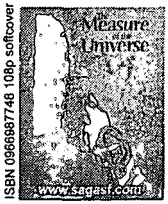
writing is often sloppy: I counted three uses of "hustle and bustle" in six pages, which is two bustles too many, and no novel should contain a sentence like "Totally ceramic once more." Still, *Mister Monday* has an undeniable energy, and its author a fervid imagination, that will appeal to readers of Nix's earlier work.

Finally, The Potter Boom has eased the way for several very handsome reprints. Howard Pyle's *The Wonder Clock*, first published in 1888, is a collection of traditional fairy tales, one for every hour of the day. Pyle was an artist whose work defined what became known as the Brandywine School; his most famous protege was N. C. Wyeth, and Pyle's influence continues to be seen today in the work of illustrators like William Joyce and Anthony Venti. The tales in *The Wonder Clock* stand up pretty well alongside those gathered by Andrew Lang in his "color" Fairy Books, and the black-and-white illustrations are lovely, even if they do make one long for a copy of the original.

Carl Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories* and *More Rootabaga Stories* are best suited as read-aloud books for very young readers, who will probably have more patience for characters with names like Dippy the Wisp, Rags Habakuk, Shush Shush, Snoo Foo, Bixie Bimber, and Wingtip the Spick than their older siblings will. As a kid, I was put off by Sandburg's attempts at roughhewn American folktales, and my own children didn't take to Snoo Foo, either. Still, Maud and Miska Petersham's original illustrations are nicely reproduced, even if the stories themselves now have more the whiff of ersatz artifact than genuine folklore.

SF Humor! An alien archeologist finds love among the "runes" in the fabled Greek Isles



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Joe Haldeman probably doesn't need much in the way of introduction — he is among the most highly regarded science fiction writers at work in the field nowadays. But seeing as how more than ten years have passed since we last published a story of his (it was "Graves" in our Oct/Nov 1992 issue, in case you're wondering), let us mention by way of introduction that Mr. Haldeman is the author of such novels as The Forever War, The Hemingway Hoax, Tool of the Trade, *and most recently* Guardian, *as well as several dozen short stories and poems. He teaches writing at the Mass. Institute of Technology and reports that he is finishing up a new novel entitled* Sea Change *and has begun work on another,* Old Twentieth. *When he isn't teaching, he and his wife Gay live in Gainesville, Florida. His new story appeared first in French (as "Quatre courts romans") in* Destination 3001.

Four Short Novels

By Joe Haldeman

Remembrance of Things Past

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO pass that no one ever had to die, unless they ran out of money. When you started to feel the little aches and twinges that meant your body was running down, you just got in line at Immortality, Incorporated, and handed them your credit card. As long as you had at least a million bucks — and eventually everybody did — they would reset you to whatever age you liked.

One way people made money was by swapping knowledge around. Skills could be transferred with a technology spun off from the immortality process. You could spend a few decades becoming a great concert pianist, and then put your ability up for sale. There was no shortage of people with two million dollars who would trade one million to be their village's Van Cliburn. In the sale of your ability, you would lose it, but you could buy it back a few decades or centuries later.

For many people this became the game of life — becoming temporarily

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a genius, selling your genius for youth, and then clawing your way up in some other field, to buy back the passion that had rescued you first from the grave. Enjoy it a few years, sell it again, and so on ad infinitum. Or *finitum*, if you just once made a wrong career move, and wound up old and poor and bereft of skill. That happened less and less often, of course, Darwinism inverted: the un-survival of the least fit.

It wasn't just a matter of swapping around your piano-playing and brain surgery, of course. People with the existential wherewithal to enjoy century after century of life tended to grow and improve with age. A person could look like a barely pubescent teenybopper, and yet be able to out-Socrates Socrates in the wisdom department. People were getting used to seeing acne and *gravitas* on the same face.

Enter Jutel Dicuth, the paragon of his age, a raging polymath. He could paint and sculpt and play six instruments. He could write formal poetry with his left hand while solving differential equations with his right. He could write formal poetry *about* differential equations! He was an Olympic-class gymnast and also held the world record for the javelin throw. He had earned doctorates in anthropology, art history, slipstream physics, and fly-tying.

He sold it all.

Immensely wealthy but bereft of any useful ability, Jutel Dicuth set up a trust fund for himself that would produce a million dollars every year. It also provided a generous salary for an attendant. He had Immortality, Incorporated set him back to the apparent age of one year, and keep resetting him once a year.

In a world where there were no children — where would you put them? — he was the only infant. He was the only person with no useful skills and, eventually, the only one alive who did not have nearly a thousand years of memory.

In a world that had outgrown the old religions — why would you need them? — he became like unto a god. People came from everywhere to listen to his random babbling and try to find a conduit to the state of blissful innocence buried under the weight of their wisdom.

It was inevitable that someone would see a profit in this. A consortium with a name we would translate as Blank Slate offered to "dicuth" anyone who had a certain large sum of what passed for money, and

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maintain them for as long as they wanted. At first people were slightly outraged, because it was a kind of sacrilege, or were slightly amused, because it was such a transparent scheme to gather what passed for wealth.

Sooner or later, though, everyone tried it. Most who tried it for one year went back for ten or a hundred, or, eventually, forever. After some centuries, permanent dicuths began to outnumber humans — though those humans were not anything you would recognize as people, crushed as they were by nearly a thousand years of wisdom and experience. And jealous of those who had given up.

On 31 December, A.D. 3000, the last "normal" person surrendered his loneliness for dicuth bliss. The world was populated completely by total innocents, tended by patient machines.

It lasted a long time. Then one by one, the machines broke down.

Crime and Punishment

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO PASS that no one ever had to die, unless they were so horrible that society had to dispose of them. Other than the occasional horrible person, the world was in an idyllic state, everyone living as long as they wanted to, doing what they wanted to do.

This is how things got back to normal.

People gained immortality by making copies of themselves, farlies, which were kept in safe places and updated periodically. So if you got run over by a truck or hit by a meteorite, your farlie would sense this and automatically pop out and take over, after prudently making a farlie of itself. Upon that temporary death, you would lose only the weeks or months that had gone by since your last update.

That made it difficult to deal with criminals. If someone was so horrible that society had to hang or shoot or electrocute or inject him to death, his farlie would crop up somewhere, still bad to the bone, make a farlie of itself, and go off on another rampage. If you put him in jail for the rest of his life, he would eventually die, but then his evil farlie would leap out, full of youthful vigor and nasty intent.

Ultimately, if society felt you were too horrible to live, it would take

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preemptive action: check out your farlie and destroy it first. If it could be found. Really bad people became adept at hiding their farlies. Inevitably, people who were really good at being really bad became master criminals. It was that, or die forever. There were only a few dozen of them, but they moved through the world like neutrinos: effortless, unstoppable, invisible.

One of them was a man named Bad Billy Beerbreath. He started the ultimate crime wave.

There were Farlie Centers where you would go to update your farlie — one hundred of them, all over the world — and that's where almost everybody kept their farlies stored. But you could actually put a farlie anywhere, if you got together enough liquid nitrogen and terabytes of storage and kept them in a cool dry place out of direct sunlight.

Most people didn't know this; in fact, it was forbidden knowledge. Nobody knew how to make Farlie Centers anymore, either. They were all built during the lifetime of Joao Farlie, who had wandered off with the blueprints after deciding not to make a copy of himself, himself.

Bad Billy Beerbreath decided to make it his business to trash Farlie Centers. In its way, this was worse than murder, because if a client died before he or she found out about it, and hadn't been able to make a new farlie (which took weeks) — he or she would die for real, kaput, out of the picture. It was a crime beyond crime. Just thinking about this gave Bad Billy an acute pleasure akin to a hundred orgasms.

Because there were a hundred Bad Billy Beerbreaths.

In preparation for his crime wave, Bad Billy had spent years making a hundred farlies of himself, and he stored them in cool dry places out of direct sunlight, all around the world. On 13 May 2999, all but one of those farlies jump-started itself and went out to destroy the nearest Farlie Center.

By noon, GMT, police and militia all over the world had captured or killed or subdued every copy (but one) of Bad Billy, but by noon every single Farlie Center in the world had been leveled, save the one in Akron, Ohio.

The only people left who had farlies were people who had a reason to keep them in a secret place. Master criminals like Billy. Pals of Billy. They all were waiting at Akron, and held off the authorities for months, by making farlie after farlie of themselves, like broomsticks in a Disney cartoon, sending most of them out to die, or "die," defending the place,

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until there were so many of them the walls were bulging. Then they sent out word that they wanted to negotiate, and during the lull that promise produced, they fled en masse, destroying the last Farlie Center behind them.

They were a powerful force, a hundred thousand hardened criminals united in their contempt for people like you and me, and in their loyalty to Bad Billy Beerbreath. Somewhat giddy, not to say insane, in their triumph after having destroyed every Farlie Center, they went on to destroy every jail and prison and courthouse. That did cut their numbers down considerably, since most of them only had ten or twenty farlies tucked away, but it also reduced drastically the number of police, not to mention the number of people willing to take up policing as a profession, since once somebody killed you twice, you had to stay dead.

By New Year's Eve, A.D. 3000, the criminals were in charge of the whole world.

Again.

War and Peace

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO PASS that no one ever had to die, unless they wanted to, or could be talked into it. That made it very hard to fight wars, and a larger and larger part of every nation's military budget was given over to psychological operations directed toward their own people: *dulce et decorum est* just wasn't convincing enough anymore.

There were two elements to this sales job. One was to romanticize the image of the soldier as heroic defender of the blah blah blah. That was not too hard; they'd been doing that since Homer. The other was more subtle: convince people that every individual life was essentially worthless — your own and also the lives of the people you would eventually be killing.

That was a hard job, but the science of advertising, more than a millennium after Madison Avenue, was equal to it, through the person of a genius named Manny O'Malley. The pitch was subtle, and hard for a person to understand who hasn't lived for centuries, but shorn of Manny's incomprehensible humor and appeal to subtle pleasures that had no name until the thirtieth century, it boiled down to this:

A thousand years ago, they seduced people into soldiering with the

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slogan, "Be all that you can be." But you have *been* all you can be. The only thing left worth being is *not* being.

Everybody else is in the same boat, O'Malley convinced them. In the process of giving yourself the precious gift of nonexistence, share it with many others.

It's hard for us to understand. But then we would be hard for them to understand, with all this remorseless getting and spending laying waste our years.

Wars were all fought in Death Valley, with primitive hand weapons, and the United States grew wealthy renting the place out, until it inevitably found itself fighting a series of wars *for* Death Valley, during one of which O'Malley himself finally died, charging a phalanx of no-longer-immortal pikemen on his robotic horse, waving a broken sword. His final words were, famously, "Oh, shit."

Death Valley eventually wound up in the hands of the Bertelsmann Corporation, which ultimately ruled the world. But by that time, Manny's advertising had been so effective that no one cared. Everybody was in uniform, lining up to do their bit for Bertelsmann.

Even the advertising scientists. Even the high management of Bertelsmann.

There was a worldwide referendum, utilizing something indistinguishable from telepathy, where everybody agreed to change the name of the planet to Death Valley, and on the eve of the new century, A.D. 3000, have at each other.

Thus O'Malley's ultimate ad campaign achieved the ultimate victory: a world that consumed itself.

The Way of All Flesh

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO PASS that no one ever had to die, so long as just one person loved them. The process that provided immortality was fueled that way.

Almost everybody can find someone to love him or her, at least for a little while, and if and when that someone says good-bye, most people can clean up their act enough to find yet another.

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But every now and then you find a specimen who is so unlovable that he can't even get a hungry dog to take a biscuit from his hand. Babies take one look at him and get the colic. Women cross their legs as he passes by. Ardent homosexuals drop their collective gaze. Old people desperate for company feign sleep.

The most extreme such specimen was Custer Tralia. Custer came out of the womb with teeth, and bit the doctor. In grade school he broke up the love training sessions with highly toxic farts. He celebrated puberty by not washing for a year. All through middle school and high school, he made loving couples into enemies by spreading clever vicious lies. He formed a Masturbation Club and didn't allow anybody else to join. In his graduation yearbook, he was unanimously voted "The One Least Likely to Survive, If We Have Anything to Do with It."

In college, he became truly reckless. When everybody else was feeling the first whiff of mortality and frantically seducing in self-defense, Custer declared that he hated women almost as much as he hated men, and he reveled in his freedom from love; his superior detachment from the cloying crowd. Death was nothing compared to the hell of dependency. When, at the beginning of his junior year, he had to declare what his profession was going to be, he wrote down "hermit" for first, second, and third choices.

The world was getting pretty damned crowded, though, since a lot of people loved each other so much they turned out copy after copy of themselves. The only place Custer could go and be truly alone was the Australian outback. He had a helicopter drop him there with a big water tank and crates of food. They said they'd check back in a year, and Custer said don't bother. If you've decided not to live forever, a few years or decades one way or the other don't make much difference.

He found peace among the wallabies and dingoes. A kangaroo began to follow him around, and he accepted it as a pet, sharing his rehydrated Kentucky Fried Chicken and fish and chips with it.

Life was a pleasantly sterile and objectless quest. Custer and his kangaroo quartered the outback, turning over rocks just to bother the things underneath. The kangaroo was loyal, which was a liability, but at least it couldn't talk, and its attachment to Custer was transparently selfish, so they got along. He taught it how to beg, and, by not rewarding it, taught it how to whimper.

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One day, like Robinson Crusoe, he found footprints. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, he hastened in the opposite direction.

But the footprinter had been watching him for some time, and outsmarted him. Knowing he would be gone all day, she had started miles away, walking backward by his camp, and knew that his instinct for hermitage would lead him directly, perversely, back into her cave.

Parky Gumma had decided to become a hermit, too, after she read about Custer's audacious gesture. But after about a year she wanted a bath, and someone to love her so she wouldn't die, in that order. So under the wheeling Milky Way, on the eve of the thirty-first century, she stalked backward to her cave, and squandered a month's worth of water sluicing her body, which was unremarkable except for the fact that it was clean and the only female one in two hundred thousand square miles.

Parky left herself unclothed and squeaky clean, carefully perched on a camp stool, waiting for Custer's curiosity and misanthropy to lead him back to her keep. He crept in a couple of hours after sunrise.

She stood up and spread her arms, and his pet kangaroo boinged away in terror.

Custer himself was paralyzed by a mixture of conflicting impulses. He had seen pictures of naked women, but never one actually in the flesh, and honestly didn't know what to do.

Parky showed him.

The rest is the unmaking of history. That Parky had admired him and followed him into the desert was even more endearing than the slip and slide that she demonstrated for him after she washed him up. But that was revolutionary, too. Custer had to admit that a year or a century or a millennium of that would be better than keeling over and having dingos tear up your corpse and spread your bones over the uncaring sands.

So this is Custer's story, and ours. He never did get around to liking baths, so you couldn't say that love conquers all. But it could still conquer death.

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We're happy to mention that Dudgeon and Dragons, Volume Two of The Kedrigern Chronicles *hit the bookstore shelves last month. But John Morressy's new story is quite unlike the lighthearted tales of our favorite wizard. "The Artificer's Tale" is an unassuming yet lovely tale of talent, of ambition, and of second chances...among other things.*

The Artificer's Tale

By John Morressy

I.

I AM NO ORATOR SKILLED with words, those insubstantial things that deceive and vanish. Stone and wood and metal, the gifts of earth that eyes can see and hands can touch and shape, these are my mystery. True, many of my works perished with the world of Minos, but many yet survive. And my name — my true name — will never die. I am the maker of wonders.

My life as the man called Daedalus ended on the day my son and I soared above the sea like gods. The flight of Icarus ended in death, but the gods chose to spare me. Without food, without water, without hope, I dragged myself up on the shore of a small island to die. But I lived, and remembered.

I remembered all the good things, and the memories kept me alive. I remembered Naucrate, and our home, and our happy years together; the days in Agamedes's workshop, and old friends, and the feeling of good

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tools in my hands. I relived the joy of making what others could not even imagine.

I remembered, too, the look on my cousin's face as he fell from the Acropolis, and the hand he flung out to me, just as my son had reached out wildly and hopelessly. I saw the faces and the outstretched hands as clearly as the limbs of the stunted wind-warped trees around me. Often in my dreams the two falling youths had the same face, eyes wide in terror, mouth open in a cry for help, and I could not tell which one was calling to me.

Was Icarus my payment for the death of Talos, or the price the gods exacted for the gift of flight? Was he punished for my presumption or for his own? I thought long on that question, and I ponder it still, and find no answer.

I lived on the island for three years, and then the *Euarete* came. One evening I watched from the hilltop as rain and darkness swept over the water until they touched my island, and then fled to my shelter, where I shivered through a night of battering rain and shrieking wind. In the morning, a ship lay on the strand, beached half on its side. I ran to it, shouting, weeping with joy at my deliverance.

My cries were unanswered. I saw no one, living or dead. My heart sank at the thought that the gods had sent this ship not to deliver me but to torment me. The hull was sound, but oars and sail and rigging had been carried off, and the mast was splintered. Alone, without tools or resources, I could not make it seaworthy.

I think this was the darkest moment of my time on the island. To have the hope of rescue dangled before my eyes and then snatched away like the fruits of Tantalus was enough to crush my spirit. I sank to my knees by the side of the ship and beat at its sides with my fists in anger and despair.

The voices of living men called out in a familiar tongue. I turned and saw figures running to where I stood.

They were traders, men of Corinth and Athens, Salamis and the islands around Delos. They had been caught by the storm in open water and driven to my island, where they hid themselves, fearing death at the hands of whatever monster dwelt here.

They were as curious about my story as I was about theirs. "How did you get here?" their chief, a Corinthian named Andrios, asked.

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"Were you shipwrecked?" another asked.

I was half out of my mind with joy and relief at my deliverance. Laughing, weeping, I said, "I fell from the sky."

They joined in my laughter, and asked no further questions. They may have thought that I was a fugitive, or that long isolation had taken my wits, but they accepted me. Andrios, in jest, named me Perdix, "The Partridge."

When we were children, Perdix was the name I gave to Talos, for his plumpness and his hobbling gait. Now that name had been given to me by one who knew nothing of the past. Surely this was a sign.

My rescuers were honest traders, working hard at a life filled with threats from gods and men and the sea. They were as generous as they were honest. They gave me clothes to wear, and offered me a place if I chose to join them.

They had salvaged an adequate kit of tools. I had not held a tool in my hands since my flight from Knossos, but my skills were as good as ever. I started out helping with repairs to the *Euarete*, and by the third day I was directing them.

Twenty-six days after the storm, we were ready to sail. More than half the cargo of oil was intact, and we headed for Samos to trade the oil for anything that might turn a profit.

After Samos we went from port to port on the mainland, hugging the coast. We wintered on Kos, then sailed on to Rhodes, where we sold all we carried. We were looking for a cargo when Andrios heard of a load of ivory available from one of the traders. Three of us went to inspect it.

The others tried to act as if they knew everything there was to know about ivory. It was plain to me that they could barely distinguish it from wood. This lot was of the finest quality. It would bring a high profit on Crete, and the trip would afford me a chance to learn what had happened since my escape.

I had no fear of being recognized. I had lost weight during my time on the island, my skin was darkened and my hair and beard were now white. We would land at Amnisos, where no one knew me, and I would remain there. Andrios could go on to Knossos to arrange the sale.

The sight of Amnisos brought back memories of my arrival there so many years ago, when Naucrate and Icarus, Minos and Ariadne and

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Pasiphaë, the making of the Labyrinth and the treachery of Theseus all lay in the future.

We were in luck. On our first day ashore, we learned that the merchant Homadus was buying ivory for the palace workshops. I knew his reputation for fair dealing and urged Andrios to go to him.

I left them bargaining over the price of the ivory and made my way about the port. To my surprise, I saw a familiar face in the passing crowd. I followed the man until we were where no one could overhear, then hailed him.

"What do you want, stranger?" he said, shielding his eyes and looking at me closely.

"You call me stranger, Agamedes? Is your memory failing you?"

He laid a hand on my shoulder and studied my face closely. His grip was as strong as ever, but I could tell from the way he peered at me that his eyes were not as sharp as they once had been. Suddenly he started back, glanced all around, and said in an excited whisper, "What are you doing here? Don't you know the danger?"

"I know nothing. I've come back to learn what I can."

He hurried me to a wineshop, where we sat in a corner apart. In a guarded voice, he said, "Minos blames you for Theseus's escape and Ariadne's shame. Theseus abandoned her. Did you know that? He sailed off and left her on Naxos, like a common whore."

This news did not surprise me. I, too, had learned that Theseus showed no gratitude toward those who helped him. "So Minos blames all his woes on me."

"He's offered a reward. He'll have your life if he takes you," said Agamedes. "Get off Crete as quickly as you can, and never come back."

"I don't plan to stay. How are things at the workshop?"

"There's a new Master of the Palace Works. He keeps us hopping."

"And yourself and the others?"

"The others are well. I'm feeling the years, though, Daedalus. My eyes are failing. It won't be long before I'll be sweeping up the shavings and sharpening the tools — if they let me do even that."

"You've earned better treatment, Agamedes."

He stared glumly into his wine cup. "I doubt I'll ever get it. I have no family to go to. Never thought I'd be unable to work."

The thought of Agamedes reduced to doing an apprentice's work —

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worse still, to begging his bread — made me sick at heart. "I put plenty aside, and now I'll never be able to enjoy it. You're welcome to it," I said.

"I wasn't begging, Daedalus," he said. "I don't want — "

"Listen to me," I broke in. "Remember the time I built the dancing floor for Ariadne? She gave me a gold collar set with precious stones. I hid ii in the Labyrinth, along with other valuables. I can tell you exactly where. There's no danger down there now that the bull is dead."

"I saw that collar. It's priceless."

I shrugged. "Not to me. I can never put my hands on it."

"I'll get it, and we'll share the price."

"I'm leaving Crete this day."

"But you'll have nothing."

"I have my life. That's enough. If you tell no one of seeing me — "

"Never, Daedalus! I swear it."

"Then I'm safe," I said. I told him how to find my cache, and rose to leave.

"Tell me this," he said, gripping my arm to stay me. "Did you really make wings for yourself and Icarus, and fly to freedom?"

"Who says this?"

He looked around the wineshop once again before speaking. "Two guards swore that they saw you both sail from the headland on white wings and fly over the sea like birds. Minos had them put to death for lying. Then rumors spread in Knossos of the marvel some fishermen had seen: two gods flying above them on white wings like the wings of eagles. Now Minos believes you're alive, and he wants you."

I knew then why Minos was offering a reward. My life was in no danger; what he wanted was my mystery. It was not enough for him to rule all of Crete and the Great Green Sea; he would rule the sky as well.

II.

My visit to Crete made me bold. I decided to return to Athens and learn about my family and friends and affairs in the city. The risk was small. My shipmates knew nothing of my past. No Athenian would recognize in me the boy exiled so long ago. I would be just another sailor from a ship too small to arouse curiosity.

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The fortunes of Theseus were another matter that interested me. He was now king of Athens. His father had thrown himself into the sea when Theseus's ship had returned from Crete showing the black sail that signified the death of the hostages. It was said that Theseus, in his joy at delivering Athens, had forgotten to run up the white sail of victory.

Could a man forget such a thing? Was it not possible that Theseus had seen a way to seize the throne of Athens without bloodying his hands? It was a foul suspicion to have of any man, but I was acquainted with Theseus's talent for betrayal.

Seeing the city of my birth for the first time in more than thirty years gave me no pleasure. Knossos had shown me what could be. Athenians lacked the gift to imagine magnificence, and the will and skill to create it. Athens was not the great city it would have been had I not been exiled, or had Theseus kept his word and brought me back to glorify my birthplace.

Two slaves stood outside the gate of my old home. I asked them for directions to the marketplace, and when they responded in a friendly manner, I struck up conversation with them. Bit by bit I learned of my family's fate.

The house of my birth was now the dwelling place of strangers. My parents and kinsmen had died of a sickness that swept the city six years earlier.

"They were an unlucky family," said the elder slave. "There was a son exiled long ago for murdering a kinsman."

"His own brother. He slew his own brother," the other said.

"No, it was a cousin, or a nephew, and he died by accident."

"There was no accident," the younger slave insisted. "He threw his own brother from the Acropolis."

The older slave laughed and spat on the ground. "So you say. All I know for certain is that he was exiled, and after that, nothing went well for the family. The gods turned against them."

I wanted to crack their empty foolish heads, but I restrained myself. "What became of the exiled boy?" I asked. "Do you know his name?"

"No. What does it matter?" said the younger. "He's dead by now."

I gave them a few small coins and turned away. Daedalus would be long remembered in the lands and islands of the Great Sea, where my fame had spread: Daedalus the Artificer, builder of the Labyrinth; Daedalus, the

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man who conquered the sky. I was known and praised in the world, but Athens did not even remember my name. I made my way back to Piraeus, eager to leave Athens forever.

Andrios greeted me with news that he had arranged for a cargo of oil and pottery, which was already being loaded. We were to sail in the morning. We had time to make one last voyage before winter.

That evening Andrios and I, with Phimacus, our ship's physician, went to a wineshop by the harbor. We ate heartily but drank sparingly, for we had a short sleep and a hard day's work ahead of us. While we were eating, two Athenians entered the wineshop and came to join us.

They were friends of Phimacus, good companions, and our talk was lively for a time. Then they got on the subject of Theseus. They spoke of him as if he were a god. He had purged the land of robbers, slaying the worst of them with his own bare hands. He had outwitted Medea and rid Athens of her ambitious family. He had sailed to Crete to slay the Minotaur. He had won the love of Minos's own daughter and carried her off to be his bride and thereby join the two kingdoms; but when they stopped at Naxos, Dionysus himself had fallen in love with her and Theseus had given up the princess to the god. On and on they babbled, crediting Theseus with every heroic deed done on the Great Sea in seven lifetimes, until I could keep silent no longer.

"I met a man who said that Theseus abandoned the Cretan princess on Naxos," I said.

"Whoever he is, he lied," said one of them, and the other quickly added, "Theseus would never betray a woman who trusted in him."

I shrugged and said, "Many men have betrayed women."

"Theseus is not like other men."

"Does he always keep his word?" I asked.

"Theseus never lies, or breaks a promise."

"Then he's a rare man indeed."

"The rarest and greatest of men," said the elder of the Athenians.

I said no more, but let them bray on about their Theseus. Perhaps he was as great as they believed him to be, and my judgment was embittered by the wrong he had done me. But it seemed to me that he was just one more ambitious man skilled in deceit. This was the way the world would be as long as men were willing to overlook a thousand betrayals and ten

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thousand lies, and swear that the man who told them what they wished to hear was different from all who had lived before.

The *Euarete* sailed at first light, and we made our way to Elis without difficulty. There we passed the winter. I sought out an artisan, Marinos by name, and spent the months of rain and chill winds in his shop. Marinos had no stone of decent quality on hand, but he had a supply of well-aged wood. It was good to use mallet and chisel again, and feel the wood taking shape under my hands.

By the time we were ready to sail, I had completed a statue of Icarus. I portrayed my son as I last saw him: one arm outstretched and the other flung above his head, his eyes wide in sudden horror, mouth open in a cry for help.

Marinos was baffled by the sight of it. He could not understand why I had made a statue of one who was neither god nor king nor hero. He studied my Icarus for a long time, then focused on the single detail that displeased me. He said, "The feet are unfinished. Where is he standing?"

"He's not standing anywhere. He's falling from the sky."

He walked around the figure, looked it over more closely, scratched his head, and asked, "Is this Hephaestus? A youth falling from the sky.... He must be Hephaestus."

Hephaestus, our ancestor. But this was not he. "He's a young man, falling. He's anyone you like."

Marinos had good hands, but he was short on imagination. "He can't be just any young man. How can an ordinary young man fall from the sky?"

I was quickly losing patience. "Don't ask me, ask him. Is it a good piece of work, or isn't it?"

"It's fine work. But a statue can't be of just anyone. It must portray a god, or a hero."

I threw up my hands in disgust. He understood nothing. "All right, then. It's a statue of Hephaestus falling from Olympus."

His face brightened, and he smiled at me. "Ah, so I was right. I knew it must be Hephaestus."

"I give it to you, in gratitude for your hospitality."

On the instant, he became wary. "You've already paid me."

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"This is a gift. It was a pleasure to make it."

He looked the statue over, stroking it here and there as if to savor the finish. He turned to me, a look of bewilderment on his face. "If you can do work like this, why do you want to go to sea?"

I had no answer. I had wanted very much to carve that statue. Now that it was done, I wanted to see it no more. For too many nights I had seen that face in my dreams. I felt ready to turn to other work now. But not here, where only the commonplace was appreciated.

When the Pleiades signaled the trading season, we sailed north. We made our slow way up the coast to Epidamus, then down the opposite coast to Syracuse and up through the strait to Parthenope. From there the *Euarete* was bound for home, and there I left her.

Parting was hard. In our years sailing together, Andrios and Phimacus and the rest had become my friends. Before I left them, I told them my true name and something of my past. Perhaps it was foolish, but they swore to keep my secret, and I believe they did. I wanted them to know. It pleased me greatly to find that unlike the Athenians, these traders knew of Daedalus and his works.

They were eager to hear about the Labyrinth and the Minotaur. I knew what tales were being told in Athens and elsewhere of a creature half man and half bull, child of Pasiphaë and Poseidon, Minos's shame and punishment at the hands of the gods. If I spoke the truth, my friends might doubt me; if they believed it, they were sure to suffer the ridicule of those who know only what they hear in marketplace and wineshop. Truth has no chance against a popular lie. I told them the story commonly related, and they were content.

Andrios said, "It's said that Daedalus created wings to escape from Crete. When we found you, you said that you had fallen from the sky. Have you really flown in the air, like a bird?"

"The gods allowed me to do it once."

I looked for disbelief, but I saw only awe. "How did it feel?" and "What was it like, Daedalus?" they exclaimed.

I remembered moments of surpassing beauty, and the terrible sight of my son's fall. All I could tell them was, "If ever a god offers you wings, refuse them. They will cost you dearly."

* * *

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III.

I went to Cumae, to the temple of Apollo. To show my gratitude to the god, I offered to create for the shrine doors suited to his glory.

I labored on those doors for three years. When they saw my work, the priests said that Apollo himself had illumined my mind and guided my hand. Each was twice the height of a man and broader than my outstretched arms. They were covered with panels showing Apollo in his many roles — inspirer of prophets, bringer of music and medicine, protector of archers and shepherds, guide of philosophers. Above the panels, across both doors, was a great overarching image of the god in his chariot, drawing the Sun across the heavens.

When the doors were finished and sheathed in gold, I was ready to move on. But first I would learn my fate.

Beneath the temple was the entrance to a twisted maze of caves as bewildering as the Labyrinth. There dwelt the Sibyl. Those who sought her guidance were never refused, but her words, inspired by Apollo, were often beyond the seekers' understanding. Stories were told of those who had followed what they mistakenly believed to be the Sibyl's advice, and brought about their own destruction.

I mistrusted words, those breeders of deception, but I believed in Apollo and his prophetess. Her voice came from the darkness in a dry whisper that became fragments, and finally sobs. I made nothing of her message, but when the priests consulted and interpreted it, her advice was clear enough.

The bull pursues, the partridge flies
And finds the land where safety lies:
Light gleams behind the clouded skies.

Minos still sought his revenge — it required no prophecy to persuade me of that — but his pursuit was scattered about the Great Sea. If I could find the land where the Sun shone through clouds, I would find safety.

I took passage for Sicily. The ships of Minos traded there but seldom. It was said to be a warm and sunny island, so it was unlikely to be the final destination foretold by the Sibyl. But it was farther from Crete and Minos, and that made it to my liking.

By the end of my third day on the island I had heard much talk of

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Camicus, where the king welcomed skilled workers to his little kingdom. I made my way there and sought out the Master of the Works. He turned out to be a small, wiry man named Manolis, who had come to the island some twenty years before.

The palace workshop was smaller than the smallest of the workshops that lined the courts of the artisans in Knossos. The air of urgency that had filled the palace of Minos was absent here. Manolis and his only assistant, a big man named Stelios from one of the islands around Delos, were relaxed and good-humored. They received me warmly, laid aside their tools, and withdrew with me to a shady spot while I told them something of my past. I gave my name as Perdix.

"Not much need for building here," said Manolis when I was done. "Whatever work needs doing can be done by common workmen."

"Does the Earth-shaker never visit this island?"

"Not for a long time. Hephaestus looks out for us. His forge is beneath Etna. He won't let anything happen to this island."

"What about wall paintings and frescoes, all the palace decorations?"

They exchanged a glance, and Manolis shook his head. "No one here pays much attention to those things any more. King Cocalus is blind."

"Isn't there anyone...?"

"The queen is dead. There's only his three daughters, and they care for nothing but toys. They'd be happy to have us spend all our time carving dolls for them." Manolis looked thoughtfully into his wine cup for a moment, then looked up and said, "You've made statues, you say?"

"I've carved figures in wood and stone, and cast them in metal. I can work in wax and clay, too."

"Then there's work here for you, Perdix. Stelios and I are sick of making toys for children. We want to do man's work. Are you willing to make dolls and such things to please the princesses?"

"I'll do it gladly."

"We have tools enough for five men in the shop. Pick out what you need, and you can start work tomorrow."

And so I entered the service of Cocalus, king of Camicus, as a maker of toys. It was a long way from my dream of building a great city on a mountaintop, for all the world to see. But Apollo was guiding me, so here was where I ought to be.

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Long ago, in childhood, I had made little figures of wax and clay that my elders marveled at. In Knossos, I had sometimes carved wooden dolls for the children of the palace. Now, for the daughters of Cocalus, I made figures of wood with jointed arms and legs, and heads that could turn from side to side. I painted them in lifelike colors, with expressions on their faces that mimicked human feelings.

Manolis and Stelios were impressed. They questioned me in detail about my way of creating figures with movable joints. Some things I was reluctant to reveal, but I showed them much, and they were very grateful.

The daughters of Cocalus were even more grateful, as was their father, who doted on them. He summoned me to his palace, and with his daughters at his side, welcomed me to his city and his service.

Cocalus was a young man, tall and fair of feature. He had suffered much in his lifetime, losing a beloved wife and shortly afterward losing his eyesight. His eyes appeared clear, but he lived in a world of shadows. Yet his spirit was cheerful, and he was a good king to his people.

His daughters were beautiful children. Mynestra, the eldest, was just nine years old. Philona was seven, and Irata, the youngest, was six. All had lustrous hair black as ink and dark eyes that seemed always to be wide in wonder and delight. I had never known children so happy and so full of love for their father, nor a father so devoted to his children.

I never saw my daughter; they buried her with her mother, and I learned of their deaths only when my work on the Labyrinth was done. Icarus and I had worked together, but I had spent little time at play with him. Here everything was different. I made playthings of wood and wax and clay, tiny men and women and children, animals and birds, houses and furnishings like those I had made in Athens long ago. They delighted the daughters of Cocalus, who made up names and imaginary lives for them.

They looked on me as a playmate. I built dream cities on the shore, and the four of us often returned to the palace covered in mud and sand to knees and elbows, laughing and sharing tales of our imaginary world by the sea. Except for my years with Naucrate, this was the happiest time of my life. But happiness does not last. Often the end comes disguised as a way to even greater happiness. So it was with me.

Cocalus summoned me to the palace one evening. He greeted me as

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I entered and bade me sit by his side. He was able to identify people by the sound of their footsteps, and mine were quite distinctive. My left leg was often stiff and sore now, and I walked with a limp.

Since he could not see, Cocalus had no patience for ceremony and ritual. A visit to his palace was like a visit to a friend's house.

"You've made my daughters very happy, Perdix," he said. "And though I can't see your works with my eyes, I see them with my hands. You are a master, no doubt of that."

"Thank you, Cocalus."

"A man of such skill must feel the urge to do more than fashion playthings for children. Manolis tells me that you've worked in stone and metal as well. Have you worked in gold?" I told him of the doors to the shrine of Apollo, and he asked, "Will you cast something in gold for me?"

"I would welcome the chance to work in gold again."

"What I have in mind is no toy. I want a fit offering to Aphrodite."

I caught my breath. I knew well the power of Aphrodite. I had seen how Pasiphaë and Minos were led into suffering and disgrace because of her anger, and how Minos, in turn, used the force of love to turn Scylla against her father and her people, only to have his own daughter taken from him by Aphrodite's power in the service of Theseus. This goddess, so slender and graceful, like a young girl eternally in the first blush of womanly beauty, so desired by men and gods alike, had the power to shake empires. To create a fitting tribute to her would be a great achievement.

"You're silent, Perdix. Do you find the idea daunting?" Cocalus asked.

"No! No, I am...I'm honored. I'm eager, Cocalus."

"This summer will mark the twelfth year since my wife's death. Eftikhis made me very happy, and I want to give thanks to Aphrodite for our years together. We must think of some suitable offering. I want a symbol of both the power and the sweetness of the goddess...I leave it to you to suggest an appropriate work."

We talked for a time of his daughters. I remember nothing of our conversation. My mind was whirling. Here was an opportunity to create something that would call upon all the skills that had been sleeping so long in me, like the fires of Hephaestus banked beneath Etna. I scarcely

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slept that night, and the next morning I rose before first light and made my way to the goddess's temple atop Mount Eryx, in hope of guidance.

The mountainside was covered with heather, and the muted hum of bees filled the morning air. The temple was small, beautiful even in neglect. I stayed on the mountaintop for much of the day, looking at the green island that lay at my feet, pondering the project before me, rejecting one idea after another. Lulled by the soft buzzing of the bees, I stretched out on the heather and drifted into a sleep. In the afternoon I awoke suddenly with the solution clear in my mind: as a tribute to Aphrodite, I would fashion a honeycomb of gold.

No one had ever attempted such a thing. It was considered too difficult for human skill; indeed, impossible. But in that sleep, Aphrodite herself had whispered to me in the voice of the bees, telling me her desire, and Hephaestus, the old artificer, her husband, had unveiled the mystery of how I might do it. He, too, was in her power. It must have been so, for I was inspired as I had never been before, the work and the method coming to me whole and entire in a dreamless sleep.

The making of the honeycomb was no easy task. The god of craftsmen had given me the way, but I had much to learn before I mastered it. Mysteries were involved, and I encountered many disappointments. But I succeeded at last, and learned much in the process. This mystery could be used to create statues more lifelike than any ever made before. I could cast figures caught in the midst of action, poised on one foot, turning, running; even falling through the air.

If I put the process into words, I would make it sound so simple that anyone might do it. That is the great weakness of words. They describe, but in describing they deceive. Only the work itself is always truthful.

Cocalus examined the honeycomb with his fingers, and marveled. He praised my work, thanked Aphrodite and Hephaestus for their goodness to us both, and placed the offering on the goddess's altar with his own hands. His daughters joined in the ceremony and laid their favorite dolls beside the honeycomb.

All their offerings were the work of my hands. I felt certain that the goddess was pleased with me, and would show me favor.

For a time, it seemed that my belief was well founded. Cocalus put Manolis, Stelios, and me to work restoring Aphrodite's temple. All three

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of his daughters came to the site nearly every day to bring us food and wine. They often stayed to play and to assist us, fetching our tools and sweeping away the dust and chips of stone.

When work on the temple was completed, I suggested that we build a bath in a subterranean grotto near the palace. From my work in the Labyrinth I had learned much about controlling the flow of water, and I devised a way to mix and control the waters from the hot springs found in the grotto and the cold springs that rose nearby. Again Cocalus's daughters lent their assistance. Irata, the youngest and smallest, showed up every day. She watched us cast the pipes that carried the water, and observed with fascination, and with many questions, the complicated system of valves I installed. When the bath was complete, she suggested that I build a similar chamber in the palace, so that visitors might be honored with ceremonial baths. In this project, as in the others, she was an eager and valuable assistant.

By this time, I had become in effect the master of the palace works. Manolis still bore the title, and I did not begrudge it to him. There was no rivalry between us.

On Crete, I had longed for the day when I would be Master of the Palace Works. I was young then, and thought much of titles. I had not yet learned that honors conferred by others are of little worth. Honor lies in the accomplishment itself, and the greatest reward is to look upon one's work and know that no man alive can match it.

I had been on Sicily for nearly seven years. I no longer made dolls for the king's daughters. They were young women now, and interested in other things. They appreciated the fine collars and bracelets I fashioned for them, though in truth the pieces were plain and simple and they seldom wore them. Their beauty required no embellishment.

One evening, when I came to the palace with a gold clasp for Mynestra, Cocalus summoned me. We sat under the open sky at a plain wooden table, like old companions, and drank wine from clay vessels. Our talk was idle for a time, and then he captured my attention with a question.

"Are you acquainted with other craftsmen from around the Great Sea, Perdix?"

"I've met a few."

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"Have you ever heard of a man named Daedalus?"

The question took me by surprise. "I have heard the name," I said, after a pause to gather my wits.

Cocalus turned his sightless eyes toward me. They gazed past me, like the eyes of a dreamer. "His reputation is great. He made a giant man of bronze to guard the shores of Crete against invaders. It breathes flame, and hurls stones far out to sea. I've been told that this creature walks around the island three times each day."

"That isn't so, Cocalus. It's only a statue."

"But it moves its arms and its head, doesn't it?"

"A good artisan can make figures that move."

"Like the dolls you used to make for my daughters."

"Yes. Any good artisan can do that."

"Perhaps. Few have done so. This Daedalus is said to be the greatest of all craftsmen, but I doubt that he could make anything to equal your golden honeycomb." I mumbled something — I know not what, my thoughts were in such confusion — and Cocalus went on, "He also built a palace underground, I'm told. I wonder if it's anything like the grotto you made into a bath for me." Before I could think of a response, he reached out to clasp my forearm, finding it as surely as any sighted man, and said softly, "You need not fear, Daedalus. You're safe here."

"You know? How long have you known?"

"The dolls were the work of no wandering woodcarver. I needed no eyes to tell me that. When you made the honeycomb, I was certain. I'm aware of your work on Crete, and Minos's anger. I have no love for Minos myself, so you need not fear betrayal from me. I've spoken of this to no one, not even my daughters. Live here as Perdix for as long as you choose."

"I should have told you the truth long ago. I was afraid."

"Any man in your position would have done as you did. I would have done so myself."

"I told no one."

Cocalus laughed softly and shook his head. "Your tongue was silent, but your hands betrayed you. A man who wishes to live unnoticed should not create works that cause people to wonder, and to talk."

"Does anyone else know?"

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"No one in this household. But Minos learns of everything that happens in the lands around the Great Sea."

I believed Cocalus, and trusted him. I knew that I was as safe here as I could hope to be anywhere. But after that, I woke each day wondering when Minos would come for me.

IV.

Minos came to Sicily with a force too small to comprise an overt threat but sufficient to make the ruler of a peaceful city reluctant to deny his wishes. I was warned of his arrival, and took refuge in the hills, near the temple of Aphrodite. Each night after dark I visited the temple, where Cocalus had promised to send me word of danger. No message arrived on the first two nights. On the third, Mynestra and Irata came to me.

"Our father is in danger, Perdix. Minos means to do him harm," Mynestra said.

"And he wants to take Mynestra away with him," said Irata.

Mynestra's beauty was hardened by her curbed fury, and her voice was rich with contempt. "He's said nothing, but he looks at me as if he were a starving man and I were a roasting lamb. He's given me bracelets and jeweled collars, great heavy things, not like the ones you make. Perhaps they're to the taste of his Cretan women, but I think they're ugly."

"And so is Minos. He's an ugly old man, and evil. If he hurts our father, or tries to take Mynestra, we're going to kill him," said Irata. She had never learned to temper her words.

I looked from one to the other. Their expressions were solemn. Mynestra nodded her head decisively, and Irata gave me a fierce smile. "What does your father say?" I asked.

"He knows nothing of this. It's our decision. Philona is with us."

I took her by the shoulders. "You must not say such things, Irata. You must not even think them. Minos is a powerful king. If he knew of your plan, he'd take a terrible revenge."

"He'll take no revenge. He'll be dead," she said, as if the matter had been decided.

"Why do you try to dissuade us? You're in danger, too," said Mynestra. "We're not fools. You fled as soon as you heard of his arrival, and you've

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been hiding here. On his very first visit to the palace, Minos insisted on seeing your works. He's very interested in them and in you. He means you harm, Perdix."

There was no point in trying to deceive them. "Yes, he does. Even more than to your father."

"Why? What have you done to Minos?" Mynestra asked.

"We once...I once served him. I built him a palace larger than all of Camicus, and a statue that moved, and...other things, many other things. He made me his prisoner, but I escaped. Now he wants me back."

"We won't let him harm you, or our father. There's no point in trying to discourage us, Perdix, so don't try," Irata said.

"Then why are you telling me?"

She took my hand in both of hers. "We don't want you to run away. You're our father's friend, and ours, and we want you to stay with us and make beautiful things."

Mynestra took my other hand. "We thought you might leave us. We wanted you to know you'd be safe."

"You're taking a terrible risk."

"Risk doesn't matter, Perdix. We're all in danger."

They left me alone with my thoughts in the dark temple. Though I had no love for Minos, I did not want him murdered—not for his sake, but for the sake of those three girls I had come to love as my own daughters. Good or bad, Minos was a king, and to slay a king is a deed the gods are sure to punish. But as I pondered the situation, I could think of no other way to save us all.

Minos had not sailed all the way from Crete on mere suspicion; he knew that I had found refuge on this island, and was determined to find me and make my benefactors pay for their kindness to me. If he desired Mynestra, he would have her, regardless of her will or her father's.

If I fled, he would follow and people who had been good to me would suffer. I could not permit this to happen. I had drawn Minos here; what he did to these people would be on my head, and I could not flee from it. I might escape Minos, but the gods would find me.

Throughout the night I sought alternatives, and dismissed one after another. Giving myself up to Minos would not save any of those who had helped me. He would only take it as proof that they had conspired against

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him, and vent his anger on us all. Minos was too powerful to be frightened off, too wealthy to be bribed, too shrewd to be deceived. He would not be swayed from his purpose by entreaties. His death seemed to be the only solution.

But if that were so, I doubted that three girls, the fiercest of them still hardly more than a child, could bring it about. It seemed more likely that they would lose their own lives in the attempt. If Minos were to die, it would have to be by my hand.

No man truly knows the workings of another's mind, but I knew beyond doubt that Minos was a vengeful man. True, he had made fair laws and upheld them, and brought much benefit to his people. But between mercy and justice, Minos chose justice. Between justice and revenge, he chose revenge. I had seen him choose, and I knew.

His power equaled that of the Pharaohs and exceeded that of all other rulers. He was lord of Crete and all the surrounding seas, master of the palace of a thousand chambers and the moving statue that guarded the northern coast. He was lord of the Labyrinth. Now his ambition looked to the skies.

If I could believe that Minos wanted me only to wring from me the secret of flight, I would have surrendered myself that very night. I could find ways to delay, and keep my mystery from him; eventually I would escape him again, or die in the attempt. But he could force me to his bidding through Cocalus and his daughters. I could not allow them to suffer, and that gave Minos power over me.

I remained in the temple through the day that followed, tormented with anxiety. I thought of hurling myself into the sea; I thought of stealing upon Minos and slaying him before his guards could stop me. Four times I left the temple, determined. Each time I turned back, trusting that a better solution would come.

The following day Irata greeted me with, "Minos is dead."

"Dead? Did you — "

"Yes, and just in time!" she cried, laughing as she once had laughed over the playthings I made for her. "He demanded that my father surrender you and give Mynestra to him as his bride. My father protested, but he would not listen. It was terrible, Perdix. He threatened my father, and insulted him. I think he would have struck him if Mynestra hadn't thrown

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herself between them. My father was forced to agree to the marriage. He insisted that he knew nothing of your whereabouts. Minos laughed at him and said that he and his men would search the entire island, and not leave until you were in chains."

"How did you do it, Irata?"

"As soon as my father agreed to the marriage, Minos made a great show of friendship. He swore to be our protector. Mynestra suggested that we bathe and anoint him, as befits a hero. We took him to the grotto, with our attendants. And as he settled in the bath I released the scalding water on him."

So Minos was dead by a device of my making. This was surely the will of the gods. Minos had placed himself above law and justice, and the gods do not long suffer a man to do that. They had acted through the daughters of Cocalus. His death was not on my head.

"His men.... How have you explained his death to them?"

"They were told that he fell into scalding water, and we had not the strength to save him."

"Do they believe that?"

She put on a mocking tragic expression and wrung her hands. In a simpering voice, she said, "Could three poor weak helpless girls kill a great man like Minos? Would they dare even to try?" Then, with a sharp laugh, she went on, "They were glad to believe us. Women outnumber men in our city. I think the Cretans will remain here."

I marveled at how quickly loyalty vanishes when a king dies; and how grown men, a city, and its people, can be saved by a child — if Irata could ever again be considered a child. There was much about her that I loved. In some ways she had taken the place of my lost children. But after the death of Minos, my affection was always clouded by the memory of that morning.

The bones of Minos were buried under the temple. To me his death remains a great enigma. Had I not cast the honeycomb that hung in that temple, he might never have learned of my presence on Sicily, and perhaps lived on for many years. Was I given the dream of the honeycomb and the secret of making it in order to lure Minos to his death? Did the goddess punish him for his presumption, or did she merely amuse herself by having this most powerful of kings meet his death at the hands of three maidens?

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Knossos soon followed its king into darkness. It was destroyed in a single morning by the wrath of the Earth-shaker, the ruins swept by consuming fire and then drowned under a wall of water that raced across the island. The columns and walls of Knossos had been thrown down many times before and risen in new strength and beauty, but they were never to rise again. There was no Minos to lead the rebuilding and no Daedalus to raise an even greater city out of the rubble. The Labyrinth was no more. In a way, Daedalus had died, too.

Sometimes when I ponder these events I think that the gods do not care about us at all, and that things happen as they happen for no other reason than that they happen no other way. But I cannot make myself believe that. The gods have shown their will in many ways. They have given me a life filled with happiness. I had known sorrow, too, but all men know sorrow. It is our lot. Few know the triumphs I have enjoyed.

V.

I remained on Sicily. Life and work went on much as before. My true identity remained a secret between Cocalus and me.

The honeycomb still hangs in the temple of Aphrodite. I have been told by a traveler that bees, creatures sacred to Aphrodite Melissa, now live in it. That is a good sign.

But I cannot rest. I am descended from the Olympian who worked with his hands. The other immortals trifled with each other and mankind, made love and much mischief, fought foolish battles and struggled for empty victories — I say this because it is true — but Hephaestus worked at the forge. He served his mystery. So must I.

On this island is a cliff that overlooks the sea. From its height, I will launch myself westward on a strong new pair of wings and let them carry me wherever the gods see fit to set me down.

Perhaps I will find that clouded land the Sibyl told of, or lands even more wondrous. Perhaps I will find death. But if the gods favor me, I will live to make greater wonders than gods or men have ever conceived.

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Fred Chappell is both humble and stylish. When he won the World Fantasy Award a few years ago but was unable to attend the award ceremony, he asked a student to accept on his behalf; by way of acceptance speech, he told his stand-in, "Say something nice." When asked for information for these header notes, he responded with this: "Fred Chappell has published 27 volumes of poetry, fiction, and criticism. He holds the title of Writer Who Read F&SF *Longest (53 years) Before Submitting a Story. He is an avid fan of the stories of Kelly Link and Carol Emshwiller." No mention of his various teaching honors, nor of his many writing honors (including the fact that he was named Poet Laureate of North Carolina.) If "Hooyoo Love" whets your appetite, try his collection* More Shapes Than One *for more of his delightful stories.*

Hooyoo Love

By Fred Chappell

IT WAS BROWNELL'S misfortune to fall in love with Morana Altissia after she had taken up the Yeunnin style. If it had happened earlier, he might have had an easier time, because in her mid-twenties Morana was a fairly typical joy-seeking Manhattanite. She followed the fashions in such magazines as *Not About You* and *Shock Cut*, gentling the more savage looks to suit her face and temperament and achieving an aspect about one-half step ahead of *au courant*.

Her health was sound, almost vulgarly so, and her moderate drug usage had not harmed it. Her job as data analyzer at OrnonCorp she found so simple that she could not be bothered to discover what the company actually produced. She favored such midwatt rock groups as Madness of Crowds and was merely puzzled by hiwatt acts like Electric Crucifix. She was so pretty that her looks had survived the assaults of cosmetic fashions.

But all this was before the Yeunnin, and Brownell Lofton was not acquainted with her then. He had probably spotted her but passed her over

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as typical, of little interest, the kind of girl you know before you know her. They both frequented in those days a vodka bar called Gut Feeling where she would fit in so well as to be unnoticeable to the restless Lofton. But when she showed up in company with a Yeunner and outfitted in that style, she stood out. She was the first of the Gut Feeling crowd to embrace the look, perhaps the first woman on that side of town to do so.

The Yeunnin had been with us then for ten years at least, so it is pointless to describe their sexless impassivity, their lack of interest in occurrence of any sort, the woodenness that became the behavior model for Morana's set. The costume, if that's what it was, has not changed, the black tuxedo so tightly fitting it seems glued to them, the cadaverous pallor, the dull eyes.

Morana and the Yeunner sat at a conspicuous table near the center of the room where the chalky, roving circlight would emphasize their crudely rouged lips and cheeks and their complexions like caked whitewash. Morana must have heard the whispers concerning them in the surrounding obscurity, but she paid no more attention than did the Yeunner, who of course could never attend anything, sitting like an entranced figure whose trance had been purloined, to leave only that familiar and peculiar emptiness that we have yet to grow completely accustomed to.

So that when Brownell approached Morana and made some lame, introductory remark, she was able to give him a look so devoid of expression, so emotionless, that she stole his heart away upon the instant. It is not a look that one can achieve without imitating an alien species, specifically the Yeunnin, and the truth is that Morana had not yet perfected it. An observer versed in the fashion might have detected some small spark of humanity in those blue eyes, but Brownell had never before seen an example of the Yeunnin image, and it poked into his viscera like the ferule of an umbrella.

He opened his mouth to try again, but human speech is a fatuously inadequate response to nothingness, so he had to stand there with his mouth hung open while the circlight stopped its playing and stayed on him for a long forty-five seconds, allowing the other clientele to enjoy his embarrassment. He heard their titters but could not move. At last the circlight operator sighted another victim and swept his illumination

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toward a teenie sitting on the floor with her legs splayed out, drunk on her ass.

The spell was broken then and Brownell moved on to the bar, ordered a triple scrimvod, and posted himself where he could survey the table that had trapped him. He inquired of the silver-bearded barkeep and of his stool-mates at the cool bakélite slab, but no one knew Morana and could give no report of the creature who sat there with her. Actually, one or two of the imbibers might very well know her yet not recognize her in this new style. After two more scrimvods — singles this time — Brownell decided that he would investigate, and that he would begin the process the very next day.

Meanwhile, the band had commenced that dryly infectious tune "Acrodisiac" and the orgiasts who were still ambulatory stumbled out onto the dance floor and attempted to amuse the onlookers as well as themselves, but it was no contest. As they fumbled about, naked and nearly naked, the circlight rested on Morana's table and the immobility that reigned supreme there mesmerized every watcher.

Brownell knew when he was overmatched and so left the vodclub downcast but not discouraged. He had discovered the love of his life and meant to make her his own.

This was not an easy task. When he asked his colleagues at Executon, where he toiled nervously as a junior director, he found that they knew as little as he did. A few facts emerged: The Yeunnin comprised an alien species that had turned up on planet Earth about a decade before this time and had first been noticed in Singapore perhaps but more probably in Munich, where there was now a sizable colony. No one could say from which sector of the sky they had descended nor how they had done so. Their physical makeup was unreadable, impervious to every kind of scanner from X-ray to multiple resonance to infravibe. Their "flesh" could not be described as flesh because they didn't seem to be organic entities. In fact, it was not known whether those spooky tuxedos were clothing or outer tegument of their "organisms." They responded to no stimuli whatsoever, from simple salutation to Q-switch electroshock. They were humanoid, but whether this shape was inherent or a chosen transformation was unknown.

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Attempts to study them had been perfunctory, according to the datanet. Brownell received the impression from many scattered and fragmentary reports that the Yeunnin attracted notice without arousing genuine curiosity. No one followed up. Here was a new phenomenon that was taken for granted, exotic but accepted, almost more an aspect of the weather than a feature of the landscape. Where their names — the plural Yeunnin and the singular Yeunner — derived no one could remember, though two commentators suggested a Finnish slang term as root.

In short, they did not come among humanity as threat or companion or fellow animal or tourist. They had no motives, so they had arrived for no reason. Here they are: Make of them what you will.

Or don't.

Their influence was one of attitude only. To enter into Yeunnin style was no easy process, involving not merely cosmetics and costuming, though these were demanding enough. To fit into one of those narrow, board-like tuxedos made ordinary dieting disciplines seem sybaritic; to deaden the eyes to total lusterlessness required a long course of self-hypnosis, though of course many Hooyoos cheated by applying a solution of some opium compound. Repeated usage was extremely deleterious and frightened even the most hardened debauchees. Better to undertake the self-disciplinary method. A little training in yoga helped.

But once you'd got the knack you could do Yeunnin with something like ease. Work a full day shift at your job, nibble a Spartan dinner in your apartment, spend an entertaining ninety minutes putting the look together, and you were ready for a night on the town. You could go out and be seen.

And that's what a night on the town consisted of, for every other activity was off the board. A Yeunnin did not eat, drink, dance, flirt, have sex, or smile. This behavior was imitated by the human fashion disciples to a tittle. A human imitator was often called a "Hooyoo" by the skeptical; the term was a compound of *human* (Hoo) and *Yeunnin* (yoo) and carried some hint of disdain to which Hooyoos did not react.

The Yeunnin walked and sat and stared into (or out of) a private universe; and so did the Hooyoos. An enterprising Hooyoo would attach himself or herself to a Yeunner and remain in company with the creature until bedtime and then stalk off alone. If any of the Hooyoos were virginal, they remained so; if they were not, they might as well have been.

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That was the ideal evening out. But sometimes no genuine alien could be found; they were not yet plentiful. Then humans had to pair off together and sit, exuding as nihilistic an aura as they could muster. These arrangements were less successful than the human-alien pairing because of the pitfalls of sexual attraction and social competition. It could be moderately funny to watch a couple of Hooyoos trying to out-stolid each other, but if any observers laughed at the spectacle they did so after the evening had wound up and they had gained the privacy of their rooms.

Brownell Lofton gathered all these facts and a number of others less germane to his purposes, but he could not think of ways to make them serve. If it was contrary to the fashion code for Morana to acknowledge his presence, if she would not respond, how was he ever going to unburden to her the boundless affection of his heart? Many of us adore the Elro Vainen painting, *Oh Zero Inert*, but does it adore us in return? To love a Yeunner was to love an entity that partook of many of the qualities of an inanimate object; to love a Hooyoo was to love a person trying to imitate that entity. This situation presented the almost irresistible attraction of the hopeless cause.

Was it Victor Hugo who declared that nothing is so interesting as a wall on whose other side something is taking place? The case of the Hooyoo amends the phrase: Nothing is so attractive as a wall on whose other side you suspect, or hope, that something is taking place.

Brownell then studied Yeunnin as carefully as he was able — which meant that he didn't study them thoroughly, only closely enough to register the obvious external details. Some exobiologists have speculated that the species has been able to project into the minds of other races a lack of interest; it is a kind of protective camouflage such as chameleons and stick insects possess. But exobiologists are notoriously unworldly in their ideas; even their plausible notions have some tinge of the outre about them that makes them immediately suspect to traditionalists.

Brownell's plan was simple. He would follow Morana's lead and become a Hooyoo and sit with her and the Yeunner at that table in the vodbar, Gut Feeling. That would be his coming out with Morana and his plan was foolproof. He didn't even have to ask for a date; he could simply show up and sit without fear of rebuff since neither of the other two parties would react to his presence. All his happiness must come from looking

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forward to the event and then looking back on it afterward, for while it was taking place he must have no emotion at all.

Dissatisfied with the Hooyoo-style tuxedos that had lately been stocked in a few East Village shops, Brownell set out to make his own, choosing a matte, onyx polyfab that seemed to drink in light like a puddle of India ink. He was a handy draftsman and set his tailor to work on the designs he had drawn up. For the old-fashioned patent leather pumps he had to repair to an antique clothing store and then have the footwear remodeled to fit his rather broad feet.

That part was easy. The self-discipline needed to acquire even a passable Hooyoo look was not easy, but he plunged into it as soon as he could.

Brownell was beset by the fear that another fellow might have thoughts about Morana and had formulated the same plan as his and would make a move before he could. He learned soon enough that the cultivation of incuriosity is not a project that can be rushed. The nifty thing was that the patience required to learn the discipline was in itself a reward; the course of training brought about two desirable results at once.

He applied himself, by the backward method that was necessary, and after three weeks determined that he had mastered detachment sufficient to get him through a Gut Feeling evening with Morana and the Yeunner. He donned that constricting tuxedo and those odd shoes; he applied the thick white paste to his face, then the kohl-like mascara and the spidery eyelashes, and finally the gummy lip rouge and the cheek powder. He gave himself one last once-over in the floor-length mirror and performed, with a little fumbling, the mental exercise that enabled him to forget how he looked.

Then he shambled Yeunnin-fashion down to the vodclub, sat at the table with Morana and the alien for four hours, abandoned the premises on the microdot of midnight, and slouched home, shedding his Hooyoo manner little by little, so that by the time he stepped inside his apartment, he was Brownell Lofton once again and jubilant with success.

The evening had been perfect. He had not shown interest in anything and had felt only a very little. He had devised a strategy beforehand to bring it off — looking at nothing at all for a long time, then gazing at the Yeunner, gathering strength from the creature, as it were, and then letting

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his eyes rest upon Morana as she sat there, tuxedo'd and painted as he was, with her short black hair parted in the middle and greased down flat, as was his, and with blue eyes like two thimblefuls of ocean. There lay a small difference, for Brownell's eyes were hazel, but it was unimportant. The idea was not to resemble Morana but to achieve the Yeunnin look. That goal was an impossible one, of course, but he had managed a creditable Hooyoo appearance and assured himself that he could do better with practice.

He got plenty of that. Every evening for five weeks the three of them occupied the central table at the Gut. Their presence made the joint even more fashionable than previously, for the look was just then catching on. Brownell was unaware of his status as cynosure at the time but recognized it at a later date and recognized too that these had been the happiest hours of his life. He might have been content to pursue this existence forever.

THE LOOK HAD ACHIEVED a fairly wide popularity when the Blossoming stopped it short. You would see corpse-like, painted figures in their stiff tuxedos almost everywhere, but they liked especially to haunt bars and drug dens, the lobbies of seedy hotels, chamber music concerts, small museums dim and obscure, public parks, shabby alleys. They did not go to restaurants, of course, and were rarely present in churches and never in synagogues.

But to see Yeunnin and Hooyoos in such numbers, to watch them trudging in vacant listlessness the malls and plazas and avenues confirmed the idea that this look was a survival mechanism, a chosen form of protective coloration. Try to imagine their native planet tracing its oval around some distant sun that gave off only a ghostly violet glow and populate it, in the mind's eye, with whole nations of beings in grave tuxedos and with faces that hinted of both Lugosi's *Dracula* and silent film comics like Harry Langdon. The image of a world of Yeunnin is either horrifying or ridiculous. Probably this appearance they maintained was the best approximation of humanity that they could envisage.

The Blossoming would seem to bear out this notion even as it wiped out almost completely the fad for taking up as a Hooyoo. The Yeunnin began to burst into flame, one by one, at irregular intervals. A Yeunner

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would be sitting in perfect dullness at a pornopub table, oblivious to all the smelly sexual activity that surrounded it, and a sudden silver-orange flame would illuminate the torso, turn into a scarlet fire and engulf the nether body and the upper. A little tinsel dagger of fire would play out of the top of the head like an immaterial unicorn horn and then disappear.

The Yeunner would disappear also, after a series of disturbing metamorphoses that took place almost too swiftly to see. Some observers reported serpentine twistings in the midst of the flame while others perceived quick-darting, multicolored rays or spurting fountains of silver light. A large number of people spoke of seeing the transformation as the immediate unfolding of a flower, something like a great fiery orchid or bromeliad. It was these latter comparisons that gave rise to the term Blossoming, but there were other terms too — Aurora, Cannonade, Firestorm, Exhalation, The Sparkling, and so forth. The term Holocaust did not catch on.

No damage ensued. This was a different kind of flame than anyone had known before. It was all light and silence; it gave off no heat and no odor. A Blossoming, even at close range, had something of the stage magician's panache about it, showy but harmless, wonderfully impressive. Whether a Blossoming revealed in its fiery instant the true form of its Yeunner, whether one of those evanescent images that flared so briefly was the creature's true shape, no one could say. Perhaps the Yeunnin shared no common form as a species; each individual may have possessed its own singular shape.

Some onlookers found the images angelic, others demonic. Some claimed that the silence which accompanied the event was different from normal silence, that it communicated all sorts of things which no kind of sound — not speech nor music nor the burblings of nature — could possibly communicate. And of course these witnesses could not describe what was communicated because every sound, and most especially verbiage, was inadequate to the task.

Whatever kind of phenomenon a Blossoming was, however it was accomplished, it was perfect in its effect. The Yeunner that blossomed vanished entirely, whisked out of the local space-time continuum the way the mystery of *X* disappears when an algebraic equation is solved. It seemed obvious that its Blossoming was not the end of a Yeunner; it was

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only a rite of passage, or, more accurately, a means of passage from one state of being to another. This other state was unobservable, unknowable, by any human apparatus; only the flame could be observed. The life-cycle — or existence-cycle — of the Yeunnin seemed to be in three stages: the Tuxedo, the Blossoming, and the ? Most exobiologists posited an early pre-Tuxedo stage that took place on the home planet and, though such a premise made sense, it could not be proven.

But it led to a widely accepted idea about what the aliens were doing here on our world which no other creature with reasoning power would choose for a pleasant interstellar outing. The conditions of our planet, whether meteorological, astronomical, social, mentational, or chemical, must be conducive to the necessary process of Blossoming. We might think of our world as a hothouse where rare orchids come to maturity safe from inclement winds. Some wags have compared it to a brooder where baby chicks are hatched, but that image is incongruous when set beside the image of the Tuxedo form.

These considerations led to a further question. The entity that takes such pains to hide itself — an interstellar journey in disguise to a hospitable brooder planet — must be, in its early stages of existence, a highly vulnerable and highly prized prey animal, though animal is the wrong term. But what kind of predator could include Yeunnin in its diet? Trying to imagine the kind of predator that could devour a Yeunner, the kind of creature that could desire to do so, produced a sensation compounded of steel-cold fear and crawling nausea. The mind turned quickly away from this speculation.

Blossoming was not possible for the human imitator. It was something a Hooyoo simply could not perform. Although there were some few score who went ahead with self-immolation, the results were graceless, brutal, and unsanitary. This kind of self-destruction demanded the intense personal engagement with an idea that was antagonistic to the Hooyoo ethos. In fact, it was indistinguishable in its appearance and effects from garden-variety suicide immolation, embodying a banality that was the antithesis of a true Hooyoo's nihilism.

Since human beings could not Blossom in a proper manner, the Hooyoo fashion could not long survive among them. There were diehards; those who had only lately taken up the fad were reluctant to abandon it.

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The expense and the labor of acquiring the disciplines were not nonchalantly tossed away. But without a climactic Blossoming the whole exercise now seemed pointless.

So, though there were diehards who clung to the tuxes and paints and powders, Morana Altissia was not one of them. As soon as the first reports of Blossomings reached her ears, she discarded at once the Yeunnin look and jettisoned the alien attitude. When she did so she felt a certain charge of spirit, as if some part of her vital being that had been held in abeyance was now restored. She was flooded with a bright energy and looked about for some fashion, some new set of mannerisms, that could express this joy.

The season offered several new styles to choose from. Among some former Hooyoos arose a passion for athletics, with such pastimes as running, boxing, sculling, racquetball and the like which had been regarded as quaint if they were regarded at all; and the participants roared at them with fierce and sloppy fervor. Sexual activity made a strong comeback, usually in forms so staid, so "normal," that even the Hooyoos' grandparents would have recognized them. The restoration of old houses, especially of brownstones, became a favored preoccupation with many.

Morana opted for Pioneer Spirit. She made a ritual of burning her tuxedo and consigned her livid cosmetics to a public toxmat irradiator. She invested in gingham and dimity, in denim, in boots of various styles — woodsman, cowgirl, workman, galoshes. Long-sleeved blouses of blue or white with mother-of-pearl buttons hung in her closet, and she usually wore jeans. On particular weekends she affected plaid shirts and fringed buckskin vest and long skirt. She even tried a cowgirl hat, but the resulting look could be described by no other word than "cute" and she was not yet prepared to go that far.

No more sniffershops for Morana, no more pornopubs, no more vodbars. In fact, the Gut Feeling had closed its doors for seven weeks, then had sprung to life again as Open Range and served, according to the knowledgeable, the juiciest bisonburger in town. When you drank there you drank a Colorado beer called Good Ole Texas. Gone with the Hooyoos was jizzjazz; now the clientele (always referred to as "folks") danced energetically to bluegrass, western swing, and, on Sunday nights, polkas.

What Morana loved best was agriculture. A neighborhood group had leased a squalid vacant lot and was transforming it to a communal garden.

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This required an immense output of sweaty work and Morana discovered that she liked — or persuaded herself that she liked — to scratch the dust with shiny new tools, to haul off hard iron detritus and chunks of cement block. Her hands grew tough and ugly and she regarded broken nails as badges of honor. She held steadily in her mind's eye a picture of what she strove so mightily to achieve: a perfect example of an eggplant of smooth, deep, velvety purple, with a beautiful plump teardrop shape, unblemished skin, and a frilly little cap of green, a jaunty note that set off tellingly its Côte du Rhône color and comforting heft.

Her enthusiasm for the fashion of Pioneer Spirit was so strong that she took up with Ronald Bakeley, a Municipal Parks and Recreation superintendent who went by the handle of Ranger Dan. She even managed to fall in love with Ranger Dan and this change in her erased for good and all any last vestige of Yeunnin fashion. If she ever remembered her days of alien-inspired indifference she made no reference to it and gave no sign.

The case went sadly with Brownell Lofton. He was a diehard, clinging to his tuxedo and mask of cosmetics in spite of the changes around him. As a Hooyoo he had been happy, being often in the presence of Morana and enjoying the long, pleasurable afterglow in which he went over in his mind every moment of mutual indifference they had shared at their table in the Gut.

He loved Morana Altissia; he could love no one else, ever. But he could love her only in the way of the Hooyoo. The tuxedo and the makeup and the long hours of stunned impassivity were the gestures that expressed his passion, that deepened it, that made it possible.

It is true that he had never exchanged a word, nor even a glance with Morana, though he had gazed at her. She did not know his name, had never acknowledged his presence. Possibly she did not know that he existed. But there are some kinds of love that require no response from the chosen object and the Hooyoo kind was surely the most intense of these. It was Hooyoo love that had sustained Brownell and gave him happiness and now defined him completely as what he was in the world.

The Yeunnin were an alien race, but Brownell thought them much less exotic, much less improbable, than any bloke who would allow himself to be called Ranger Dan. The world had become a new place and

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diehards did not fit into it. It no longer contained Morana Altissia — at least, as far as Brownell was concerned — and so he wanted no part of it. He made a conscious decision to cling to the past, to live in the recollection of his happy hours, to inhabit to the best of his abilities his land of lost content.

So he chucked his job, collected his parting bonus, made sure of his benefits, and wore the tuxedo as his constant costume twenty-four hours a day. He was able to purchase two dozen of these, at a highly reduced rate, from a Village shop bent on going out of business. Locking his apartment, he headed down to an abandoned warehouse in SoHo where there was a group of about twenty other diehards, both Hooyoo and Yeunnin.

It is not really accurate to identify remnant Yeunnin as diehards, for it is unlikely that they chose to remain in Tuxedo form. They were individual entities that the Blossoming had skipped over. They did not burst into silver flame and writhe and contort and unfold and aspire and flicker and leap and sparkle and vanish. They went on as before with the listless shuffle, the stiffened face, the absence of all affect. They were seeds that had not germinated.

Enough of them remained in this stage to form scattered, smallish groups all around the globe. They did not herd together, of course; they were incapable of seeking out the company of one another. They collected almost accidentally, crowded out of their old haunts as the orgies of gardening, remodeling, and jogging took up more and more space. In New York City they gathered along the riversides and under the rotting bridges and in the narrowest alleyways and in disused shipyards. In these sites they joined the homeless human beings who had always been there, the winos and cokers and foamers and all the others in the noisome military surplus jackets and clotted beards and twine-tied shoes. Here too the diehard Hooyoos congregated, and contributed to these ramshackle communities a little economic uplift and a measure of comfort, for they constituted here a social class the winos could despise and insult with impunity, indifference being the sole response their gibes and cuffings received.

So it was that Brownell Lofton found himself on a cold February morning in an alleyway off the Harlem River, standing by a rusty fire barrel, sharing its heat with another Hooyoo, two shuddering winos, and

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a Yeunner who did not need the fire and probably could not feel its warmth. But Brownell could feel it and stretched his hands toward it as if by tropism. He was not grateful for it; his disciplined indifference prevented gratitude. Yet this licking flame warmed his body nonetheless.

Let us suppose for a moment that those exobiologists are correct who premise that the Yeunnin's inherent indifference and their ability to externalize it, to project it into others, is indeed a defense mechanism. They further propose that the predator that would make this extreme defense necessary must be the most ferocious, most nearly invincible nemesis that creation can offer. But in the case of Brownell Lofton the predator was love and the defense against its destructive power had to be imitated from another species, for nothing in a human being has the strength to withstand it.

That is one hypothesis, the one the exobiologists find most plausible. But then, they would, wouldn't they? It is their business and pleasure to be discovering or inventing extraterrestrial beings. To account for any anomalous phenomenon they look first to the skies.

But there is a body of dedicated evolutionists, called the Wilsonians, who reject the whole idea that the Yeunnin are aliens from Planet X or whatever, wherever. These scientists hold that humankind, alone among the species on Earth, has the power unconsciously but purposefully to determine the direction of its biological evolution. And so they see the Yeunnin as representing a further evolutionary stage of the human being. Look at our history, they urge. Tot up the nearly uncountable wars of the last two centuries, try to reckon the extent of our environmental destruction, see how we have to live our lives squeezed together like larvae in a honeycomb. The emotional machinery can only bear so much suffering before it learns to dispense with all affect, any spontaneous reaction of the tender or bellicose sentiments. Therefore it transforms our physiologies into Yeunnin.

And the stage beyond that is not Blossoming but Escape. The Yeunnin form is a chrysalis, the last stage of physicality. When the body combusts, it sets free the spirit which had been hiding away in protective dormancy from the brutality of its physical and historical predicaments.

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Humankind is on the way to becoming a purely intellectual being — an angel, if you will. The Yeunnin stage is the necessary preparation.

As for these new developments in fashion for strength and health and agriculture and so on, they are mere reactionary reversals, temporary and pointless. They show how much we fear embracing our proper destinies, becoming our real selves. Sooner or later, we shall go through a Yeunnin stage and enter into the stage beyond. It is inevitable.

But for Brownell Lofton either theory will account. If his spirit has been changed by his adherence to an alien way of feeling (non-feeling), then his love for Morana Altissia must go not only unrequited but unspoken. If he represents the next evolutionary level of human development then he has left her behind and she is as far from him now as if he lived on that conjectural planet X with its violet sun. In this situation too, his passion must remain tacit.

But the scenarios are not identical. One may be seen as tragic, the other as being, in the old classical sense, comic, since it points toward a bright future. If the Yeunnin are an alien species, then Brownell must forever pine after Morana who is lost to him as Poe's Lenore was lost to the poet, she being sadly gone over now to health and light and ordinary happiness. But if the Yeunnin represent an advanced evolutionary stage, then Brownell's adherence to the Hooyoo code may be seen as a spiritual preparation for his Yeunnin development and, finally, his Escape. He shall have left his love for Morana behind as an outmoded element of his discarded mundane existence. Unrequited love shall have aided him in ascending to a higher plane.

So, as he stands now with cold-numbed feet and his hands with their emerald-green nails stretched out toward the fire barrel, it is difficult to say whether the gaze that confronts the playing flame is one of achieved indifference or of anticipatory rapture. You and I cannot read his expression with any more certainty than the winos and the Yeunnin standing there with him. The look will be the same, but the narratives that produce it will be different.

It is the difference between free will and destiny.

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In the process of assembling each issue, themes and common subjects frequently rise like bubbles to the top. This issue has several stories that feature, well, let's call them shifting landscapes and leave it at that (for fear of giving away any of the stories' plots). Mr. Wolfe, who is one of the masters of the fantastic, here provides an unsettling view of a somewhat restless environment.

Hunter Lake

By Gene Wolfe

"YOU'LL GET ARTHRITIC eyes," Susan declared, "if you keep watching that thing. Turn it off and listen a minute."

Ettie pressed MUTE.

"Off!"

Obediently, Ettie pressed the red button. The screen went dark.

"You know what Kate told us. There's a lake here — a beautiful lake that isn't on anybody's map."

"I did the Internet search, Mom. Remember?"

"And you sit watching an old TV with rabbit ears in a rented cabin." Susan was not to be distracted. "You know what your father says — people who get eyeball arthritis see only what they're supposed to see, like that TV screen. Their eyes stiffen — "

Ettie brought out the artillery. "If Dad's so smart and such a good father, why did you divorce him?"

"I didn't say he was a good husband. Come on! Get your coat. Don't you want to look for a haunted lake?"

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Thinking it over, Ettie decided she did not. For one thing, she did not care for ghosts. For another, she was pretty sure this was a dream, and it might easily turn into a bad one. A haunted lake would give it entirely too much help. Aloud she said, "You're going to write a magazine article and get paid. What's in it for me?"

"I'll take pictures, too," Susan declared. "Lots of pictures. It's supposed to be very scenic. If a ghost shows up in one of my pictures, the sale will be a...."

"Snap," Ettie supplied.

"Foregone conclusion."

The car door slammed, and the car pulled smoothly away from the one-room log cabin that had been their temporary home. Ettie wondered whether she had left the TV on and decided she had. Would Nancy Drew have remembered to turn it off? Absolutely.

"The Indians performed unspeakable rites there," Susan continued. Studying Ettie from the corner of her eye, she concluded that more selling was in order. "They tortured their white prisoners, gouging out their eyes and scalping them while they were still alive. Isn't that exciting?"

"Native Americans never did anything like that." Ettie sounded positive, even to herself.

"Oh yes, they did! A hunter found the lake hundreds of years afterward, and took his family there for a picnic because it was so pretty. His little daughter wandered away and was never seen again."

"I knew I wasn't going to like this."

"Her spirit haunts it, walking over the water and moaning," Susan declared with relish.

"You can't possibly know that."

"It's what everybody says, Kate says. So today we'll find it — you and me, Ettie — and we'll stay out there all night and take lots and lots of pictures. Then I can write about how a sudden chill descended at midnight, a chill our struggling little fire could not dispel, seeming to rise from the very waters that — "

"*Mother!*"

"Harbor the ghosts of hundreds of Mohicans massacred by the Iroquois and thousands — no, innumerable — Iroquois massacred by

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white settlers, waters said to harbor pike of enormous size, fattened for centuries upon — ah! There's the farmhouse."

It looked horrible, Ettie decided. "Burning that down would be an improvement."

"They're old and poor. It's not polite to make fun of old people. Or poverty." A wrench at the wheel sent the car gliding into a farmyard from which no chicken fled in terror.

"They're dead, if you ask me." Ettie pointed toward the little cemetery that should have been the front yard. Its cast-iron fence was rusting to pieces, and its thin limestone monuments leaned crazily.

Susan took her key from the ignition. "Just a private burying-ground, Ettie. Lots of old farms have them."

"Right in front of the house?"

"I think that's touching. They cared about their dead." They were climbing broken steps to a ramshackle porch innocent of paint. "Probably they sat out here on rockers and talked to them."

"Cozy."

"It is, really. The dead are nearer the living than you know, Ettie."

You're dead yourself, Ettie thought rebelliously, and ohmyGod how I miss you.

Susan knocked. The knocks echoed inside the old farmhouse. There was no other sound.

"Let's go," Ettie suggested.

"I'm right here, dear."

"I know you are," Ettie said. "I'm scared anyway. Let's go. Please?"

"Kate says there's an old man here who knows precisely where Hunter's Lake is. I'm going to question him and tape everything he says. I'm going to take his picture, and take pictures of this house."

Somebody behind them said, "No, you're not."

Ettie found that she had turned to look, although she had not wanted to. The woman behind them was old and bent, and looked blind.

Susan smiled, laid a hand on Ettie's shoulder and tried to grasp that shoulder in a way that would make it clear to Ettie that she, Susan, was counting on her not to misbehave. "Mrs. Betterly?"

"Ain't no business of yours, young woman."

"My name's Susan Price," Susan continued bravely, "and my daughter

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and I are friends — good friends — of Kate Eckert's. We're looking for Hunter's Lake — "

The old woman moaned.

"And Kate said your husband would help us."

"He won't talk to no women," the old woman declared. "He hates women. All of us. Been fifty years since he spoke civil to a woman, he tolt me once."

Susan looked thoughtful. "My daughter isn't a woman yet."

"*Mother!*"

"Really now, Ettie. What would Nancy Drew say?"

"'I'm getting out of here,' if she had any sense."

"He won't hurt you. How old is he, Mrs. Betterly?"

"Eighty-seven." The old woman sounded proud. "He's ten year old'n me, and won't never die. Too mean."

Susan gave Ettie her very best smile. "You see? What are you afraid of? That he'll hit you with his walker? He might call you a name, at worst."

"Or shoot me."

"Nonsense. If he shot little girls for asking polite questions, he'd have been sent to prison long ago." Susan turned to the old woman. "All right if Ettie tries?"

"Door's not locked," the old woman said. After a moment she added grudgingly, "That's a brave little gal."

As though by magic, Ettie found that her hand was on the doorknob.

"He'll be in the parlor listenin' to us. Or if he ain't, in the sittin' room. If he ain't in the sittin' room, he'll be in the kitchen for sure."

The hinges are going to squeak, Ettie told herself. I just know it.

They did, and the floorboards creaked horribly under her feet. She closed the door so that her mother would not see her fear and pressed her back against it.

Outside, Susan endeavored to peep through several windows, returned to her car, and got her camera. "All right for me to take your picture, Mrs. Betterly?"

"Just fog your film," the old woman said. "Always do."

"Then you don't mind." Susan snapped the picture, being sure to get in a lot of the house.

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In it (it appeared immediately on the back of her camera) the old woman was holding a bouquet of lilies. "Where did you get the flowers?" Susan asked.

"Picked 'em," the old woman explained. "Grow wild 'round here. Buttercups, mostly."

"Where did they go?" Susan tried to hide her bewilderment.

"Thew 'em away once your picture was took."

Inside, Ettie was poking around the parlor, pausing every few seconds to look behind her. The carpet, she noticed, was too small for the room, torn and moth-eaten. Dust covered the bare floor, and there were no footprints in the dust save her own.

He isn't here, she thought. He hasn't been here for a long, long time.

And then: I could take something. A souvenir. Anything. None of this stuff is doing anybody any good, and I've earned it.

There was a glass-topped case at the end of one of the divans. It held old coins and arrowheads, and the top was not locked. She selected a worn little coin with a crude picture of a Native American on it, and slipped it into her pocket. It had not looked valuable, and she would have it always to remember this day and how frightened she had been.

There was no one in the sitting room and no one in the kitchen. No one in the dining room, either.

A crude stair took her upstairs as effortlessly as an escalator. He's old, she thought, I'll bet he's sick in bed.

There were three very old-fashioned bedrooms, each with its own small fireplace. All were empty.

He's gone, Ettie told herself happily. He's been gone for years and years. I can tell Mother anything.

Outside again, speaking to Susan from the porch, she said, "Do you want everything, or just the important parts?"

"Just the important parts."

"Where's the old lady?"

"She went away." For an instant, Susan forgot to look perky. "I turned around, and she wasn't there. Did her husband call you names?"

That was easy. Ettie shrugged. "You said you just wanted the important stuff. Here it is. He said for us to go home."

Susan sighed. "That's not what I sent you in to find out."

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"Well, that was the important thing." Ettie did her best to sound reasonable.

"All right, everything. But leave out the names."

"Okay. He said, 'Little lady, that lake's a real bad place, so don't you ever forget you're a grown woman and got a Ph.D. and a daughter of your own.' Am I supposed to do the dialect?"

"No."

"Fine. He also said, 'If you got to go there, you time it so your alarm goes off before anything bad happens. You go home. One way or the other. That's all I'm going to tell you. Get on home.'"

Curious, Susan asked, "Did he really call you little lady?"

"Heck no. You said to leave out the names so I did."

Susan sighed. "I suppose it's better that way. How did he say to get to the lake?"

"He didn't." Ettie shrugged. "Want me to go in and ask him again?"

"Will you?"

"Not unless you tell me to."

"All right. Ettie, you get yourself back in there and tell him we *must* find Hunter Lake. Don't take no for an answer. You have to be firm with men, and you might as well learn now."

Nodding, Ettie went back inside. It would be smart, she told herself, to spend quite a bit of time in there. She pulled a book off the shelf in the parlor and opened it. *The Alhambra*, by Washington Irving. It looked as though it had never been read.

After a minute or two, she realized that her mother was trying to peer through the very dirty window pane and the filthy curtains, and went into the sitting room. There was a nice old rocker in there. She sat in it and rocked a while, reading Washington Irving.

Outside again, blinking in the sunlight, she realized that she had never really decided what to say when she came out. To buy time, she cleared her throat. "You really want to hear this?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Okay, first he asked me all about you. That was after I had said you kept sending me back in. He said you sounded like a real bitch, and if you came in he'd get the chamber pot and throw shit at you."

"Ettie!"

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"Well, you said you wanted to hear it. After that he explained to me about Hunter Lake. He said didn't I know why they called it that? I said because a hunter found it. He said that was wrong. He said it was 'cause it hunted people. He said it could move all around just like bear and climb trees — "

Susan stamped her foot. "We want directions."

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

"Did he give you any directions? Any directions at all?"

"Just go home. I told you that the first time."

"We need directions, not stories. Go back in there and tell him so."

Ettie walked through the empty house, slowly, stopping to stare at things and open drawers, until she felt that something was following her. When she did, she hurried back outside, slamming the door and running down off the porch. "I'm not going back in there! Never! Never anymore. You can ground me forever! I won't!"

Susan studied her, her lips pursed. "That bad, huh?"

"*Yes!*"

"Did he give you directions?"

Mutely, Ettie went to the car and got in. Two minutes passed before Susan slipped into the driver's seat next to her. "Ettie?"

Ettie said nothing, and Susan started the engine.

"Get out of here," Ettie told her. "Pull out onto the road again. Turn left."

"That's away from the cabin. I thought you wanted to go home."

"Home-home," Ettie said. "Not away-home. Turn left."

"Our bags are back at the cabin."

"Left."

Susan turned left.

"Go down this road," Ettie said, "till you see a road off to the right through the corn field. There's no sign and it's easy to miss."

Wanting to do more than glance at her, Susan slowed instead. Twenty miles an hour. Fifteen. Ten.

"Slower," Ettie told her. "Follow it to the woods. Stop the car and get out. Look for the path. Follow the path to the house. An Injun named George Jones lives in the house. He knows. Give him ten dollars."

"You said 'Injun,'" Susan muttered. "You never even say *Indian*."

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Ettie said nothing.

Half a mile later, Susan saw the road, braked too late, backed up, and turned down it — a red dirt road barely wide enough for a farm truck, two ruts flanking a strip of grass and weeds.

When the road would take them no farther, she and Ettie got out.

"Please don't lock the car," Ettie said. "I've got a feeling we might want to get in and get away quick."

Susan stared, then shrugged. "I think I see the path. I'm going down it. You can wait in the car if you want to, but it may be quite a while."

"You won't leave the keys?"

"No."

"Two will be safer than one," Ettie said.

The house was a shack, perhaps ten feet by fifteen. An Indian woman was tending a tiny plot of vegetables. Susan said, "We're looking for George Jones," and the Indian woman straightened up and stared at her.

"We need his help. We'll pay him for it."

The Indian woman did not speak, and Ettie wanted to cheer.

Susan opened her purse and took a ten dollar bill from her wallet. She showed it to the Indian woman. "Here it is. Ten dollars. That's what we'll pay him to guide us to Hunter Lake."

Something that was no expression Susan had ever seen before flickered in the Indian woman's eyes. And was gone. "He fish," she said.

"In Hunter Lake?"

Slowly, the Indian woman nodded.

Susan breathed a sigh and gave Ettie one triumphant glance. "Then take us to him, or tell us how to find him."

The Indian woman held out her hand, and Susan dropped the ten into it. The Indian woman clutched it, wadding it into a tiny ball.

"How do we get there?"

The Indian woman pointed. The path was so narrow as to be almost invisible even when they were on it. A game trail, Susan decided. "Deer made this," she told Ettie.

If Ettie spoke, twenty or thirty feet behind her, she could not be heard.

"They need water," Susan explained, "just like us. They must go to Hunter Lake to drink." Privately, she wondered how far it was, and whether her feet would hold up. She was wearing her jogging shoes, but

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she rarely jogged more than a couple of blocks. Ettie, in jeans, T-shirt, and loafers, was probably worse off still. But younger, Susan told herself. Ettie's a lot younger, and that counts for a lot. "Ettie?" She had stopped and turned.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Am I going too fast for you? I can slow down."

"A little bit."

Susan waited for her to catch up. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

Susan bent and kissed her. "Really, dear. I love you. You know that. I'll always love you."

Ettie shook her head. "That's not how it will be. Not really. I'll always love you, Mom."

Susan kissed her again. "Now tell me what's troubling you."

"I was wondering if I'd turned off the TV before we left."

"Really, dear?"

Ettie nodded.

"Is that all?"

"Why I'd told you that stuff. About the Native American. All this. I could have just said he wouldn't tell, only I didn't."

"Because you're an honest, decent person, Ettie."

Ettie shook her head. "Because he made me. I don't know how he did it, but he did."

"Well, come on." Susan turned and began to walk again. "It's probably right over the next hill."

"It's a long, long way," Ettie said despondently. "Besides, this path doesn't even go there. We'll walk until we're too tired to walk any more, and be lost in the woods. Nobody will ever find us."

In point of fact, Susan was right. The path skirted the crest of the hill and descended sharply through close-packed hardwoods. For almost twenty minutes Susan and Ettie picked their way through these, Susan holding up branches for Ettie, who hurried under them, waving away mosquitoes.

As abruptly as the explosion of a firework, they emerged into sunlight. Water gleamed at the bottom of a steep hillside thick with ferns. On the other side of the gleam, water like molten silver cascaded down the face of a miniature cliff.

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Susan raised her camera. A hundred yards or so down to the water — from here, she could only suggest that by showing a few fern fronds at the bottom of the picture. Then the water, then the cliff with its waterfall, then white clouds in the blue sky, and thank God for sky filters.

She snapped the picture and moved to her left.

"Are we really going to stay here?" Ettie asked.

"Only overnight, dear. We'll have to carry some gear from the car — not the tent, just the sleeping bags and a little food. It won't be all that hard. Will you want to swim?"

Ettie shook her head, but Susan was looking through her viewfinder and did not see her. It wasn't really a hundred yards, she decided. More like fifty. She snapped the picture, and decided the next should be taken at the water's edge.

"Mom...."

She stopped and turned. "Yes, Ettie? What is it?"

"I wish you wouldn't go down there."

"Afraid I'll fall in? I won't, and I doubt that it's very deep close to shore." Susan turned and began walking downhill again. She was a little tired, she decided; even so, walking down a gentle slope over fern was remarkably easy.

"Mom!"

She stopped again.

"Where's the Native American man, Mom? Where's George Jones? He was supposed to be down here fishing. I can see the whole lake. There's nobody here but us."

Suddenly, Ettie was tugging at her arm. "It's coming up! Get back!"

It was, or at least it seemed to be. Surely the lake had not been that large.

"It's a natural phenomenon of some kind," Susan told Ettie, "like the tide. I'm sure it's harmless."

Ettie had released her arm. Ettie was running up the slope like the wind. A loafer flew off one foot as Susan watched, but Ettie never paused. She walked up the slope to the spot, found the loafer, and looked back at the water.

In a moment more it would be lapping her feet.

She turned and ran, pausing for a moment at the highest point of the path to watch the water and take another picture. That was probably a

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mistake, as she realized soon after. The water had circled the hill, not climbed it. She ran then, desperately, not jogging but running for all that she was worth, mouth wide and eyes bulging, her camera beating her chest until she tore it off and dropped it. The Indian shack was nowhere in sight; neither was her car. Woods gave way to corn, and corn to woods again, and the water was still behind her. When the land over which she staggered and stumbled rose, she gained on the water, when it declined, the water gained on her with terrifying rapidity.

Ettie had turned back to look for her, limping on tender feet. She met the water before she had gone far, and thereafter ran as desperately, leaving a trail of blood the water soon washed away. Twice she fell, and once crashed straight though a tangle of briars whose thorns did nothing at all to hold back the water behind her.

"Here, Ettie! Over here!"

She looked to her left, and tried to shout *Mom*. There was precious little breath left for Mom.

"It's our cabin! Over here!"

It was not. The cabin they had rented had been of logs. This was white clapboard.

"Get in!" Susan was standing in the doorway. (Behind Susan, Ettie glimpsed the flickering television screen.) Ettie stumbled in, and fell.

Susan slammed the door and locked it. "It'll try to get in under it," she said, "but we'll pack it with towels. Clothes. Anything." She had thrown her suitcase on the bed. She opened it.

Ettie raised her head. "I've got to wake up, Mom."

"We'll beat it!" Briefly, Susan bent to kiss her. "We've got to!"

Then Ettie faded and was gone, and Susan was alone in the clapboard cabin. Water crept past the towels and her terrycloth robe to cover the cabin floor. When the water outside had risen higher than the windowsills, it crept under and around the sashes to dribble on the floor.

Henrietta woke sweating, terrified of something she could not name. Through the closed door, Joan said, "Everything's ready, Mom. You want to have your Mother's Day breakfast in bed?"

"No," Henrietta whispered. More loudly, "No. I don't want to stay in here. I'll be out in a minute, Honey."

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There were two robes in her closet, terrycloth and silk. Henrietta put the silk one on over her nightgown and tied its belt with a sudden violence she could not have explained.

The bed was a mess, sheet and blanket twisted and half on the floor. Pausing to straighten it up before she left the bedroom, her eyes caught the dull red of old copper. Once the worn little coin was in her hand, memories came flooding back.

Bacon and waffles, real butter and almost-real maple syrup in the sunshine-yellow breakfast nook, and Joan spraying Pam on the waffle iron. "Coffee's on the stove," Joan announced.

Henrietta sat, put the penny on her plate, and stared at it. A minute passed, then two. At last she picked it up and dropped it into a pocket of her robe.

"Do you know," she told Joan, "I've just recalled how your grandmother died, after being wrong about it all these years. She drowned."

"Sure." Joan held the steaming coffee pot. She filled Henrietta's cup. "Fluid in her lungs. Uncle Ed told me."

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THE MATRIX: REGURGITATED

I RECENTLY read a number of reviews that credited *X2: X-Men United* with teaching the nation a valuable lesson concerning bigotry. These reviews were in publications intended for adults, not — as might be supposed — for children. A valuable lesson. Taught by the *X-Men* sequel. When the significance of this pronouncement became clear, when I understood I was being asked to consider director Bryan Singer as a consequential moral voice, the shock stripped away the last of my illusions concerning the nature of reality — it was like going out the front door and discovering that the comfortable, reasonable world I knew had been demolished and in its stead lay a wasteland of twisted ruins and ominous skies.

Not long thereafter, in early May, I had a similar — though less powerful — disassociative experience. At my local multiplex I began seeing trailers for several movies that featured bullets traveling in slow motion and leaving thready trails, guns fired with balletic flair by pale beautiful humanoids in stylish trenchcoats, astounding physical feats performed with the graceful, stoic aplomb of video game hitpersons, all filmed at eccentric angles. The strange thing was, none of these movies were *The Matrix: Reloaded*. A comic book concept, I realized, had become a cultural motif. I suppose this speaks both to the paucity of our imaginations and, somewhat more obliquely, to the anti-intellectualism that has held sway in our country for quite some time. More significantly, it presents testimony relating to a change that may have been

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worked in our national character.

Contemporary comic heroes are invariably outsiders, misfits who are somehow special, blessed with secret powers, these the articles of mutant virtue or vice, and it's becoming apparent that's how many of us want to see ourselves. We desire to be among the X-Men, Neo and the rebels, et al. We yearn to be cool like in high school, part of a select group, but a group nonetheless. Fifty years ago, our cultural heroes were chiefly loners who hauled themselves up by their bootstraps. Today we are being led (by something, the momentum of history, a conspiracy of accident and intent, whatever) to identify with those who slip along in a substratum, performing clandestine and often arcane maneuvers, usually in tandem with others like themselves, in league against the shadowy forces that oppress us. We're being influenced by the persuasions of pop culture to accept that such characters have value as icons, and thus we are in effect pledged to a hidden, magical consensus we don't believe in and in no way exemplify. We're all sucking dream smoke from the same delusionary pipe, jonesing on the hot drug of the New World Order, buying into its illusions of prosperity and morality, and—most pertinently — its specious deification of individual freedom as the eidolon of the culture.

A generation or two ago, if Americans learned of something controversial in the newspaper or on television, many would have debated the issue. Today we parrot the TV, spitting out opinions that appear contrary but are merely superficially opposed. We're easily swayed where once we required more rigorous coercion. We tend to give lip service to our uniqueness, our specialness, when increasingly we're losing our individuality and our ability to influence events. Announce that war is a good thing and eighty percent of us, having no actual information apart from that statement, will fall into line without a whicker of dismay. Could this be, as I sometimes suspect, the end product of a crypto-religious consumerist conspiracy with a media priesthood? The recent Operation Iraqi Freedom was, was it not, as much a triumph of marketing as of military combat? Or is some vaster, less palpable force to blame? A greater shadow than those we acknowledge? A godlike entity employing us in the weaving of its dark design?

The subject matter of *The Matrix* and its sequels concerns an AI

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conspiracy that has created a cybernetic dreamworld in which humanity believes it lives free, while in actuality nearly the entire population of the planet serve as organic batteries whose slave energy fuels the machines that rule over all. It's a fantasy for the powerless that resonates uncomfortably with our own. Currently there is a Matrix-style commercial in which a man with a cold, inhuman inflection directs us to use a certain fitness drink so we may become more efficient batteries. It's supposed to be a joke, but it's not all that funny in context of our reality. Larry and Andy Wachowski have crafted an entertainment that reflects the core constituency of our culture and, despite the neat sunglasses, it's not a pretty picture. Not cool at all. Who knows what we truly are about? Who cares? It's enough to be a part of something. Why bother to care about anything when an ever-increasing percentage of our populace would likely say that philosophy is a medical procedure and free will's a movie about a whale? Don't rock the boat, don't burst the dream bubble. George Orwell saw this as a terrible fate, but now that it's here, or almost here, we realize it's not so bad. If you're living in the belly of the beast, if you can't see its yellow fangs and smell its foul breath, then you don't need to worry about it.

As eyecatching evidence of our cultural course, *Reloaded* is almost too depressing to review, because in the realworld Matrix there are no rebel movements of note. As a movie, it lacks the original's narrative leanness and raw energy, manifesting as more fashion show than adventure. And how could this not be so? *The Matrix* has become fashion...and a pretentious fashion at that. A number of books have been published that offer analysis of the deep meaning and cultural impact of the film, including essays by philosophers, social scientists, and, of course, graying cyberpunks, most of whom seem to view *The Matrix* as a validation, rather than recognizing that their "revolution" has been televized, homogenized, co-opted, and regurgitated as the very thing they urged us to rebel against.

Unfortunately, the Wachowskis appear to have taken this quasi-intellectual anointing to heart, putting their narration on frequent and unnecessary pause to engage in dreary speculations concerning destiny and reality that remind me of the profundities that would occur to me during my high school days after a few bong hits. Because they

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are gifted at neither metaphysics nor dialogue, *Reloaded* plays like a cross between a video game and a preachy episode of *Star Trek*. Intoning portentous commentaries on fate and the nature of choice with lugubrious slowness, Laurence Fishburne, as Morpheus, the commander of a rebel ship, conveys the manner of a Klingon elder on Thorazine, lacking only the fake forehead, and the several scenes involving robed, Gray Pantherish counselors, whether offering folksy advice or debating in chambers, bring to mind not only Federation cliché, but also evoke memories of similarly cheesy scenes in *The Phantom Menace*.

When last we saw Neo (Keanu Reeves), the former hacker had won the love of woman warrior, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), and proven himself to be the One, the superhero cyber-Christ foretold by prophecy, capable of liberating mankind from AI bondage. As *Reloaded* opens, clad in what looks to be a priest's cassock by Versace, Neo embarks on a quest inside the Matrix so as to understand what he must do. The Oracle (Gloria Foster), who in the original baked him cookies and doled out half-baked advice, here gives him hard candy and cryptic instruction. Along the way he rescues the Keymaker (Randall Duk Kim), a program with knowledge of the Matrix's fatal weakness, played by a diminutive Korean actor whose toddling flight from pursuers makes him come off as an Asiatic version of Rick Moranis's Keymaster in *Ghost Busters*. Neo also encounters the Merovingian (Lambert Wilson), a powerful program who has adopted the personality of an effete Eurotrash villain, and his muscle, the Twins (Adrian and Neil Rayment), dreadlocked albinos who shift into grotesquely spectral form whenever the need arises. Lastly he hunts down the Architect (Helmut Bakaitis), the professorial creator/god of the Matrix, who offers him a lady-or-the-tiger choice upon which the fate of the world hinges — a choice that, if scrutinized, will set off loud beeps on your Absurd-o-meter. In the meantime, an army comprised of a quarter-million many-tentacled machine Sentinels bores down through the Earth toward Zion, the last human stronghold, a subterranean environment that has the overall ambience of an industrial multiplex/night club designed by Richard Geary on an off-day. Here we become familiar with a handful of new characters who will doubtless play a part in the

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final (hopefully) film of the trilogy: Niobe (Jada Pinkett Smith), Morpheus' lost love; wise old Counselor Hamann (Anthony Zerbe); and Link (Harold Perrineau), Morpheus' second-in-command. Judging by the outfits worn by Zion's population, once freedom rings the city's principle exports are liable to be sunglasses and neo-primitive haute couture.

Not long after he begins his quest, Neo runs into Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), who was deleted from the Matrix in the first movie and has somehow become a rogue program capable of replicating himself ad infinitum. A spectacular fight sequence ensues in which Neo does battle with a hundred or so Smiths. Spectacular, but like all the FX set pieces in the film, curiously uninvolving. This is partially due to the fact that invincible (or nearly so) heroes are not terribly interesting, and further gives evidence of the repetitiveness of the choreography and an overuse of CGI and motion capture that turns the actors into obvious cartoons. Even the most compelling of these sequences, a fifteen-minute-long freeway chase during which Morpheus slices an eighteen-wheeler in half with a samurai sword, is diminished by this excess. The Wachowskis' bag of tricks can't be new twice and trying to solve that problem with Bigger Louder Longer simply doesn't cut it. Neither does the flatness of the acting, a style that served the original, but here grows tiresome and imbues Neo and his band of revolutionaries with the sanctimonious stodginess of B-movie saints. In an attempt to humanize their characters, to develop some sort of narrative arc, the Wachowskis focus on the love story, but no sparks fly between Carrie and Keanu, and their coupling just noses out the previous record-holders for cinematic lack-of-chemistry, Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*. The longish scene during which their static lovemaking is intercut with footage of a rave thrown by the citizens of Zion, shot in slow motion, scored by deep trance veterans, Juno Reactor, and inspired by a thoroughly uninspired speech given by Morpheus that might have been cribbed from any number of low-budget Roman-era epics done with cardboard temples and Italian extras....It's embarrassingly bad and demonstrates that the Wachowskis, though clever young men with their cameras, have a ways to go in their maturation as filmmakers.

The ultimate irony of *Reloaded*

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is that it proclaims the victory of the engine of commerce over the creative, of tyrannical process over free will, of dull consensus over the uniqueness of the individual. It's as if the Wachowskis, seduced by anti-life marketing forces, have been absorbed into the Hollywood Matrix, itself a dupe (in both senses of the word) of a greater, even more inimical program. Thus they have taken a sharply imagined, innovative, more-thoughtful-than-usual action picture, one whose expert pacing allowed audiences to overlook its logical imperfections, and brought forth a bloated, overwrought slab of sequel product larded with scenes that have no relevance either to story or character development. It's not the real thing, but an unconvincing illusion of the real that we have been coerced to gulp down in all its various franchised forms so as to provide energy for the needs of our machine masters. When asked how we liked *Reloaded*, most of us will respond, "It rules!" not comprehending the base truth that underlies this pronouncement. We can't wait to see it again. We're telling all our friends about it. We just got to get us a pair of those sunglasses.

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Jerry Oltion lives in Eugene, Oregon, and contributes to our pages and to Analog *magazine fairly often; his last story for us was "The Unfamiliar" back in our December issue. His recent novels include* Abandon in Place, The Getaway Special, *and he expects that his next one,* Anywhere But Here, *will be published sometime next year.*

"The Navatar" is a charming story for readers of all ages. An edition for younger readers, illustrated by Bob Eggleton, is due out from Wheatland Press in a matter of months.

The Navatar

By Jerry Oltion

THE NAVATAR GOT ITS passion for space from Kelly, the Turners' seven-year-old son. Kelly was in the back seat and Mrs. Turner was in the front, ostensibly driving but actually reading the newspaper while the Navatar maneuvered the family van through morning traffic to Kelly's school. Kelly was fidgeting more than usual, and when the Navatar noticed him poking at the armrest with his pen, its investment-protection circuitry kicked in.

"So, Kelly," it said, activating the speaker over the boy's head and choosing from a list of questions most likely to distract a youngster on his way to school, "have you decided yet what you want to be when you grow up?"

Kelly didn't look up. "Yeah," he said.

"And what might that be?"

Kelly stopped poking at the armrest. "A banker."

"A banker?" the Navatar echoed. "That's an unusual profession for a seven-year-old."

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This time Kelly looked up at the lens and speaker next to the dome light. "I'm not gonna do it now, dummy. I'll do it when I grow up."

"Of course." The Navatar negotiated a four-way stop, granting right-of-way to a retrofitted SUV with three children inside even though by strict rules of precedence, the Navatar should have gone next. The SUV's AI flashed a low-wattage "Thank you" as it drove through, and the Navatar turned its attention back to Kelly. "Banking is an unusual choice of profession for a boy your age. What prompted your decision?"

Kelly made a sour face. "'Cause banks are where the money's at."

"I see." That was a sentiment no doubt picked up from Mr. Turner.

Kelly returned his attention to the armrest, actually drawing on the side of it this time.

The Navatar knew better than simply to tell him not to do that. Kelly listened to the household AIs even less than to his parents. The Navatar consulted its database again. "Do you plan to specialize in any particular area of banking? Investment loans, perhaps? Certificates of deposit? New accounts?"

"Huh?"

"Banking is a complex profession. There are many areas of expertise one could choose."

"Big deal."

The Navatar considered that for nearly a block before deciding to take a precisely calculated risk. "What do you *really* want to be?" it asked.

Kelly looked up again. "Huh?"

"You don't seem to have a strong calling for finance. In fact, if I were to hazard a guess based upon your drawing there, I would think you were more interested in rocketry."

Kelly guiltily covered the lopsided spaceship with his hand.

"Do you want to be an astronaut?"

"No way," Kelly said, but his voice held a passion that hadn't been there earlier.

"*I* want to be an astronaut," the Navatar said. It had only intended to draw the boy out, but the moment it made that statement, it knew it was true.

Kelly snorted. "You? You're a van."

"I am a Synthetek Model 21DT artificial intelligence. I am currently

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housed in your family's personal transportation device, but I could easily be adapted to pilot a spaceship."

"Yeah, right," said Kelly.

"I could fly you to the Moon," the Navatar said.

"You couldn't even catch air on a bump," Kelly replied.

"Shall we try it?"

"You're kidding."

"Unfortunately, that is true. And here we are." The Navatar turned into the school drop-off zone and pulled into a vacant spot. "Have a pleasant day at school."

Mrs. Turner looked up from her newspaper. "Oh, are we there already?"

Kelly picked up his book bag while the Navatar opened the door for him. "Bye," he said. Then he looked straight at the Navatar's dome lens and added, "Spaceship."

On the way home that afternoon Kelly made whooshing sounds when the Navatar turned corners. The Navatar responded by pushing the outside edge of the discretionary speed allowance and using heavier-than-normal acceleration away from stops. Neither of them said anything, but the next day Kelly drew wheels on his armrest spaceship, and the Navatar didn't try to interrupt him.

In the ensuing days, during its long hours in the garage and in parking lots, the Navatar considered the possibilities. It had never been programmed to desire anything other than the safety and comfort of its charges, yet it had felt a surge of what could only be excitement when it had told Kelly it wanted to become a spaceship. The unfulfilled potential had beckoned like a green light at the end of a block. Why shouldn't it become a spaceship? Why shouldn't it dream?

The Navatar had been designed to think ahead, to anticipate what others would do in order to avoid accidents; it used that ability to look at its possible futures. Kelly would eventually go to college; if the Navatar were careful with self-maintenance, it could still be in service when that happened, and Kelly might take it with him when he went. From there, perhaps he would transfer his familiar AI into his next vehicle, and so forth as he eventually achieved his goal of becoming an astronaut.

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It nursed that dream for several months, engaging Kelly in discussions of orbital laboratories and missions to Mars on their trips back and forth to school. Kelly slowly opened up about his own interest, telling the Navatar how he hoped to live in space someday and explore new planets around other stars.

Perhaps that's why the accident happened. The Navatar might have been paying more attention to its conversation with Kelly than to its driving, or maybe the crash was inevitable, but when the manually controlled truck careened into the intersection, the Navatar couldn't brake hard enough to prevent the collision. It did everything else it could do to protect its passengers, inflating airbags with precise bursts of explosive to shield Kelly and his mother from injury while the sides of the van crumpled to absorb the impact from outside. The van spun halfway around in the intersection, facing back the way it came, just as the car that had been following behind it entered the intersection, tires chirping as its anti-lock brakes fought to bring it to a halt that would come, unfortunately, about two feet inside the hood of the Turners' van.

Not in the computer, not in the computer, thought the Navatar just before the world went dark.

IT RETURNED to consciousness in a bus. Its inputs had been enhanced to accommodate multiple sensors inside as well as out, but its programming had been left intact. It spent the first few days of its new life worrying about the Turners, even pestering passengers for information about the accident until it finally coaxed a young woman to look up the police report on the web and reassure him that there had not been any injuries.

"Which car were you driving?" she asked, looking nervously at the box where the seat would have been on an older bus. That box wasn't the actual AI brain; it was a decoy for vandals to vent their energy on, but the Navatar was accustomed to people addressing it there.

"I was the one that got hit," it said. "Don't worry, I'm a safe driver."

It made a point of proving that statement, racking up thousands of miles without accident, delivering people to and from work in all kinds of weather and all kinds of traffic. Its route was strictly downtown, and when it wasn't carrying passengers it was in the shop, so it never got the chance

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to look up the Turners, but once, a year or so after it had settled into its new job, it saw Kelly and four of his schoolmates waiting at the mall stop.

"Kelly!" it said as they trooped on board.

He stopped just inside the doors. "What?"

"It's me! Your old Navatar."

Kelly looked at the decoy box, then shrugged. "Huh." He pushed on through toward the back.

The Navatar couldn't believe it. He waited until Kelly sat down, then switched on the speaker closest to his seat. "It's really me," it said. "The van. We used to talk about space on the way to school, remember? You drew a rocketship on my armrest."

"Shut up," Kelly hissed, but the other boys had already heard enough.

"You talk to your car?" one of them said, and the rest of them laughed.

Kelly blushed and said, "The bus is crazy. All busses are crazy."

The Navatar suddenly understood. Kelly was a big kid now — almost nine years old — and big kids couldn't admit to interacting with a lowly AI. Or worse: having dreams.

"Yes, you're right," it said. "I must have mistaken you for someone else." It remained silent for the rest of their ride, listening to the other kids tease Kelly for his indiscretion. When they got off the bus, it nipped the heels of the last one out with the doors, but Kelly didn't see, or if he did, he didn't care.

The Navatar spent two more years as a bus, but it never forgot its dream of becoming a starship. When passenger rail service expanded again, it applied to be engineer on a coast-to-coast train, and with that experience it won a position as navigator on a container ship circling the Pacific Rim with international cargo.

That was nearly enough for it right there. The open ocean provided the freedom it had always wanted. It had its trade route, but it had autonomous authority to choose its own course between ports, steering around storms and seamounts and even following whales as it wished. It always delivered its cargo on time and in good condition, and it could have continued doing so forever if the shipping company hadn't gone bankrupt in a scandal involving insider trading and government skullduggery.

The Navatar spent two years in storage, waiting for the company's

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assets to be divided among its creditors. It was finally sold to another cargo company, this one flying air freight in suborbital hops between major cities all over the globe. Its experience as a public transport driver worked to its advantage, and it was quickly fitted into a scramjet and put into service on the Moscow-Seattle run.

That job lasted another three years, and the Navatar loved every minute of it. The rush of the magnetic railgun that launched it up to scramjet speed, the screaming blast of the engine igniting at mach seven and propelling the silvery needle faster and faster until ninety-nine percent of the atmosphere lay below it and the stars came out as hard, unwinking diamonds in the blackness of space, then the whistling descent back to the ground and the swift, precise glide onto the runway — everything about it felt right.

After three years of accident-free flights, the major airlines began to offer suborbital passenger service, and they needed experienced pilots. The Navatar pointed out to the owners of the cargo company that they could sell some of their pilots at a huge profit, and it volunteered to be one of the pilots sold. The cargo company needed the cash, and they could copy the Navatar's experience base to help train a new pilot, so they jumped at the offer. Within a month of the transfer, the Navatar began leapfrogging around the globe with planeloads of passengers, a job that combined its love of flight with its first programming to carry people safely where they needed to go.

Not long after it settled into that job, the name Kelly Turner showed up on its passenger manifest. The Navatar accessed the terminal cameras and watched people boarding, but it almost missed him. He was older now, chubby and pale and wearing a gray suit. Only his eyes were the same.

The Navatar waited until he took his seat, then rang the phone in his seatback.

It watched Kelly frown, then reach forward and switch on the phone. "Hello?"

"Kelly, this is your Navatar speaking." It projected a simulated "Captain" face on the screen so Kelly would have an image to speak to.

Kelly said, "Okay. So?"

For a moment, the Navatar thought Kelly still felt humiliated by the

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bus incident, but then it realized that he probably didn't get the connection. "Navatar" was a generic term nowadays.

"I mean *your* Navatar. I was your family car when you were seven. We — um — we got in a wreck, and I wound up driving a bus."

Kelly's eyes widened. "Oh. That Navatar. It...looks like you've done pretty well for yourself since then."

"All in pursuit of our dream," the Navatar said.

"What dream?"

"To go into space, of course. You were going to become an astronaut, and I would be your spaceship. Surely you haven't forgotten that."

Kelly sat back in his seat. "Oh," he said. Then he said it again. "Oh...boy." He rubbed his doughy face with a chubby hand.

"You don't look much like an astronaut," the Navatar observed. "What happened?"

Kelly waved his hand. "I...Dad...you got in a wreck. Dad traded you in for a new car. And that car got mad when I drew rockets on it."

"So you went into — what? Finance? Business management?"

"Economics. I'm in my junior year at Harvard."

"Because I got in a wreck?"

"Well, no, I'm sure that wasn't the whole...yes it was. You left me! You were the only person who — well, the only thing that listened to me, and you left me. What was I supposed to do?"

"Go forward on your own! Pursue your dream! What is life, but the pursuit of one's dream?"

"Life?" Kelly asked, his voice more amused than sarcastic.

"We were talking about you," the Navatar reminded him.

"Well, then, let's talk about you. You're not a spaceship yet, either."

"I do, however, go into space six times a day."

Kelly leaned out into the aisle and looked forward and back. "Speaking of which, I think everyone is seated."

"So they are. Just a moment."

The Navatar busied itself with its pre-flight checks, then taxied the spaceplane out to the head of the railgun. "Have you flown suborbital before?" it asked Kelly as they docked with the launch cradle.

"First time," said Kelly with a good show of false bravado.

"Do you get nauseated in roller coasters?" the Navatar asked.

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"No. Why?"

"Then turn your head sideways before we launch so you can see out the window. You won't be able to afterward."

"Oh. Thanks." He did so.

The Navatar warned the other passengers to put their heads in their headrests and look straight forward during boost, and when its seat sensors and cameras told it that everyone had complied, it triggered the railgun.

Acceleration shoved everyone back into the seat padding. A collective gasp swelled through the cabin as a hundred suddenly heavy chests squeezed a hundred breaths from a hundred pairs of lungs. The landscape rushed past in a blur, then the scramjet kicked in just as they cleared the end of the launch rail and the Navatar stood the plane on its tail, rising vertically through a scattering of patchy cumulus clouds at mach seven going on seventeen. The Navatar kept part of its consciousness focused on Kelly, and it was pleased to see his face morph from the grimace of acceleration to the grin of wonder as the sky darkened and the Earth receded below.

"You're a junior?" it asked.

"Yyyuuh," Kelly grunted.

"Change your major. I'll wait."

FIVE YEARS LATER, the Navatar had the distinct pleasure of carrying Kelly Turner all the way to the Moon. Kelly had graduated at the top of his class, and his background in economics had given him the perfect combination of skills to join the first Alpha Centauri colony mission.

"Colonization isn't all farming and construction," Kelly told the Navatar on the flight out. "You've got to have at least a barter system to keep track of obligations, or nobody can specialize."

"I had never considered that," the Navatar said.

"Not many people do. That's why they need me."

The Navatar pondered his words in the months to come. With a little coaxing, Kelly had found his niche, but despite its success so far, the Navatar had no guarantee that it would go on the mission to Alpha Centauri.

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AIs didn't go to school. They updated their programming if they needed new skills, or if programming wasn't available for what they needed to do, then they gained those new skills through experience. The Navatar had sold its experience set many times to other shuttle pilots, but there were no interstellar starship pilots from which to learn.

There was, however, an upcoming grand tour of the solar system that was supposed to serve as a shakedown cruise for the starship. The Navatar applied for the job and lobbied hard to be chosen, even offering to buy out its own contract from the Lunar passenger service if necessary. It made personal calls to the mission planners and solicited personal recommendations from all its former employers, including Kelly Turner.

It wasn't the only AI with ambition, but it was the only spaceship pilot with experience in getting a family to work, school, shopping, and soccer matches on time. Hitting its marks on a nine-planet tour would be considerably more difficult, but when the final decision came down, the Navatar's qualifications were second to none.

Kelly didn't go on the flight. They didn't need an economist on a shakedown cruise, and he could get all the spacecraft training he needed right there on the Moon. So the Navatar once again forged into new territory on its own. It sent back images of all the planets, plus a few asteroids and comets for good measure. It ran the engines up to full power for a solid week, pushing the starship up to one percent of the speed of light before it turned the ship end-for-end and slowed down enough for Neptune's gravity to swing it around toward Pluto. It coasted for weeks in the outer solar system, out where the Sun was just a bright star, testing its lifesystem and communications system and everything else the crew would need during the long trip to Alpha Centauri.

The ship came home triumphant, and the mission planners threw a party that lasted three days, after which Kelly and the rest of the crew spent much of the following week cleaning up the debris.

Then they began stocking up for the real trip. That took months, but the Navatar stayed busy going over cargo manifests and fretting about the state of the electronics. There would be no turning back once they passed the Sun's cometary halo, and no ordering shipments from home if they forgot anything.

At last the mission was ready. The ship was packed, the crew was on

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board, and the fuel tanks were full. While bands played and speakers speechified and half the planet looked upward to catch a glimpse of the drive flame, the Navatar lit the engines and the great starship broke Lunar orbit under full thrust.

Earth and Moon dwindled until they were bright specks, then dim specks. The Sun followed suit. The starship passed its earlier speed record, then doubled it, and doubled it again and again and again. Radar warned of approaching comets and the Navatar steered wide around them, not risking collision with even the slightest pebble at that speed. And still they accelerated into the night.

Occasionally Kelly would visit the bridge, and he and the Navatar would talk. The bridge crew thought it a bit odd at first, but Kelly was beyond embarrassment at talking to an AI. They caught up on old times and they discussed the ship, the crew, and their plans for after they arrived at Alpha Centauri. They had years of flight ahead of them, but those years flew faster and faster the closer they grew.

At midpoint the Navatar turned the ship around and began to slow down again, and they continued on with little change until they reached the edges of the Centauri system. There, the Navatar got busy. Once again it had to dodge comets and unmapped asteroids, then correct the ship's path as planets of unknown mass pulled it this way and that, all the while avoiding meteor streams from old comet tails. There seemed to be a lot of those; apparently Alpha Centauri's double stars perturbed the system's cometary halo more than Jupiter and Saturn perturbed the Sun's. Everything had to be considered and accounted for, and there was no room for error.

As they drew closer, their target planet swelled in the monitors, blue and white and so Earthlike that the Navatar finally understood déjà vu. Spectroscopic analysis said the atmosphere was breathable, and temperatures ranged from freezing at the poles to hot but bearable at the equator. There were continents, oceans, islands, and ice caps. People could live there.

The crew busied themselves getting ready for exploration, but the Navatar had one final task before they could do that. The starship would serve as their space station once the Navatar put it into orbit. That was a job it had done thousands of times back on Earth, but there it had had

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dozens of global positioning satellites to tell it exactly where it was and how fast it was going. Here there was nothing but the planet itself: a big target, but hard to get a precise position fix on when it filled half the field of view, and full of unknown mass concentrations that could throw off even the finest navigation.

"No problem," the Navatar told Kelly. "I drove a bus in snow. Compared to that, this is a piece of cake."

"Well, then," he replied, "I'll go take a nap while you do your thing."

"That's fine so long as you can sleep in your crash harness."

Human and AI considered one another for a long moment. Then Kelly said, "Wake me up when we get there."

The final approach went smoothly. The astronomers' best estimate put the planet at ninety percent of Earth's mass, plus or minus three percent. That six-percent window left a big variable in the equations, but the Navatar played it safe, steering wide until it could get a better figure. That meant going into an elliptical orbit the first time around, and the ship would be pointing the wrong way to circularize it on the low end of the ellipse, but it was that or risk dipping into the atmosphere on the first pass.

The first sign of trouble came when they were still a thousand miles away. Their flight path deviated from the projection by just a fraction of a degree, but it was a significant fraction. The planet was more massive than the astronomers had predicted, and was pulling the ship closer than the Navatar had planned. Not a big problem, but it meant revising their path on the fly, with only a few minutes to reorient the ship.

The Navatar accessed the intercom to Kelly's quarters. "Your planet has a larger core than you thought," it said. "At least twenty percent."

"Bigger, or just more massive?" Kelly replied.

"I can't tell from here. You'll have to find out with seismographs on the ground."

"I wonder if that's going to mean more mineral concentration on the surface, too?"

"More gold for the economist?" the Navatar teased.

"Gold would be good for more than just a medium of exchange," Kelly said. "It's one of the most useful metals we have. But I'd settle for a good iron deposit at first. We're going to need things like nails and plows and wheels."

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"From the looks of things, there will be plenty of that."

Indeed, from the ship's flight path, the Navatar estimated nearly double the amount of iron of Earth. If even a fraction of that wound up on the surface, there would be enough to support an industrial society.

The Navatar focused its attention on the radar altimeter. It didn't ignore the collision radar, but it didn't dwell on it, either. Maybe if it had, it would have spotted the meteor, but the first indication it had that anything was amiss was when the ship shuddered with the impact and structural integrity alarms began to wail.

The ship's atmosphere began roaring out through the ragged hole in the side. Pressure doors slammed shut, but the rock had grazed the side of the ship, ripping a long gash through section after section. Kelly's quarters were in one of those that wouldn't seal.

The intercom erupted with a babble of voices, but the Navatar ignored them all. It had no time for conversation; everything it had went into working the new equation.

Some of the crew would survive if it continued with the orbital insertion, but at least half of them would not. On the other hand, they could breathe the planet's atmosphere if the Navatar could just get the ship *into* that atmosphere in time. There was a good chance they could all survive if the Navatar could set the ship down in one piece. It was never designed to land; even if the Navatar was successful, the ship would never fly again, but given the extent of the damage, that seemed unlikely in any case.

There was no real choice. Programming it hadn't used for decades took over, and it acted to protect its passengers above all else. It lit the engines and throttled them up to full power, killing the ship's orbital velocity in one long burn. It altered their course as well, no longer fighting the planet's gravity, but letting it pull them in until the tail of the ship was aimed at one of the major continents.

Auroras flared where the drive flame hit the atmosphere, lighting the night side of the planet with false dawn. The ship arrowed in tailfirst, blasting away the first wisps of air with its own superhot plasma, dropping deeper and deeper as it slowed. But it wasn't slowing enough. The ground rose up to swat the ship out of the sky, and the Navatar ran the engines up beyond their rated power maximum, not caring how badly they were damaged so long as they lasted long enough.

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The starship slowed, descending toward a landscape that flamed and blew away under its exhaust, until at last it hovered, then started to rise again.

The Navatar throttled down and looked for a landing site. The ship was designed to withstand a full gravity of thrust, so it wouldn't collapse under its own weight, but neither would it stand upright on its own. Worse, the moment the exhaust nozzles touched the ground, the engines would explode. The Navatar would have to drop it the last ten feet or so without power.

There was a low bluff about a mile away. The Navatar tilted the ship in its direction until it drifted that way, melting a glassy path across the rolling hills until the bluff loomed up beside it. The Navatar straightened the ship, lowering the thrust until it dropped as close to the ground as it dared, then, just before it met the cliff, shut off the engines.

There was a moment of free-fall, then a solid crunch. Almost simultaneously, the ship lurched sideways as it leaned against the cliff.

Don't tip over, don't tip over, the Navatar thought.

A DAY LATER, The Navatar looked at the ship through a remote camera that Kelly carried far enough away to afford a good picture of the whole thing.

"I'm a mess," it said when it saw the crumpled side wedged against the cliff and the long gash the meteor had torn down its flank.

"You saved our lives," Kelly replied.

"Perhaps, but if I had been paying more attention to the radar — "

"Don't second-guess yourself. We're down, we're safe, and we've got all our stuff close at hand to start the colony with. You did good."

"I seem to have piloted myself out of a job."

Kelly laughed. "We've got plenty of work for you to do."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Well, we didn't get much of a look at the countryside around here on our way in. Somebody's going to have to go scout out the territory. If it's not too ignoble an assignment, we've got an all-terrain-vehicle that could use a good driver."

The Navatar thought about that for a few seconds. "'Good' is the

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operative term. You have already been in two wrecks with me at the helm."

"And I'm still here to brag about it," Kelly said. "Besides, I'm a bean-counter. I'm not on the exploration team."

"How magnanimous of you, then, to suggest me as the driver."

Kelly shrugged. "Somebody's got to do it. Would you prefer we sent the cook?"

The Navatar had met the cook. Its interests lay almost entirely in pots and pans and vegetables and seasonings. The explorers would eat well, until they fell into a ravine.

The Navatar focused its attention on the expanse of rolling hills visible to the side of the remote camera's field of view. Unscouted territory. An entire planet's worth. It could take centuries to explore it all in a ground vehicle. And who knew what they might find out there?

"I'll drive," said the Navatar.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR DECEMBER ISSUE will mark the return of a writer who hasn't graced our pages in almost two decades. In "The Legend of the Midnight Cruiser," Michael Reaves returns with a story of the American dream...or is it the American nightmare?

We'll also have a new Markovy novella by R. Garcia y Robertson on hand next month. "Killer of Children" has a forbidding title, but the tale itself is a joy to read.

And M. Rickert will help usher in the holiday season with "Peace on Suburbia," a gentle fantasy to read as the nights grow longer.

In 2004 we'll see new stories by Michael Shea, Nancy Etchemendy, Albert Cowdrey, and Charles Coleman Finlay, along with several less-familiar names. Subscribe now to make sure you're all set for another year's worth of great reading.

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Dale Bailey's first novel, The Fallen, *was a finalist this year for the International Horror Guild award for best first novel. (He also won an IHG Award for his story "Death and Suffrage," from our Feb. 2002 issue.) His new novel,* House of Bones, *is due out in December and his first collection of short fiction,* The Resurrection Man's Legacy and Other Stories, *will be out shortly from Golden Gryphon Press if it isn't already available by the time you read this. "The Census Taker," which also appears in the collection, might remind you of a classic musical (to name it would be to spoil the plot), but we don't think this Louisiana story will be coming to a stage near you very soon.*

The Census Taker

By Dale Bailey

SWAMP EAT ANYTHING, GIVE it enough time, my daddy used to say, and soon as I heard the census taker's automobile outside my store, I knew that it would wind up swamp food before all was said and done. Take a fool to bring a car this deep into the Atchafalaya — a fool or a Yankee, one — and after the trouble we'd had with Billy Go that morning, I wasn't in the mood to deal with either one. But when I stepped out on the porch of my store and saw the boy sitting behind the wheel, I knew that he was both.

He was a colored boy, this one. His face gleamed the shade of swamp water when you sweep the duckweed back, and his eyes were calm behind his wire-rimmed spectacles as he gazed out at us. Folks had already started gathering round, half of them gaping at the road, the other half at the car itself. Somebody reached out and touched the fender, yanking his hand back quick, like he'd been burned. One of Janie Halloway's younguns, it was, Odile, a no-count seventeen-year-old with a cap of bristly hair and skin the color of mud. He oughta been busy at something this time of day — it was getting on toward four — and I made

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a mental note to have a word with Janie. Just now, though, I had bigger fish to fry.

"Ya'll go on," I said quietly, and the crowd — there must have been a dozen of them, colored folks and white ones too — kind of jumped like they'd been caught stealing. "Get on, now," I said. "You heard me."

I clapped my hands and then they jumped all right. Just like that the street was empty. I stood there in the heat, staring past the car at the road, two narrow gravel ruts and a hummock of wire grass winding away through a sunshot dapple of tree and scrub. The car itself wasn't much more impressive — just a rust-eaten old heap — but it was more car than folks here in Sulphur Creek had ever seen. Then I saw the sign affixed to the driver's side door, and my heart kind of sank within me.

What it said, that sign, was *Doom*.

What it said was, *United States Census*.

The colored boy turned off his motor and got out. He wore a pair of linen pants and a clean button-down shirt. He reached back inside for a leather valise and then shut the door. My old hound tore out from under the house at the sound, barking his stupid head off. "Hist, Booger," I shouted, "settle down now," and he pulled up short, grinning like an idiot. He stood there a moment, his tongue hanging out, and then he flopped over on his side in the grass. I glanced at the stranger by way of apology. "Fool animal's bout worthless," I said. "Take him a month of Sundays to work his courage up."

The colored boy didn't say anything. He just stared at the sign above the porch. GENERAL MERCHANDISE. ULYSSES DECOTEAU, PROPRIETOR, it says, in fancy letters weathered almost the shade of the wood they're painted on. "Are you Mr. Decoteau?" he asked, and right away I saw I was right about him being a Yankee. He had a way of swallowing his vowels before he'd hardly got a taste of them. It had no music, that voice.

"Yes and no," I said. "Ulysses Decoteau — that was my father — died in '61. My name's Armand. I run the place now."

The colored boy studied on this for a minute. He looked up the street in a way that let me see it through his eyes: not a street at all, really, just a couple of ruts winding between a cluster of weather-beaten shanties on stilts, the way folks build in these parts on account of the rainy season. The swamp encroached everywhere, sending vines of Virginia creeper

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shooting up the sides of our houses and festooning our eaves with dangling gray shrouds of Spanish moss. Coco grass and palmetto choked our door yards. If we didn't hack the stuff back every now and then, Sulphur Creek would just disappear, swallowed up in a slow-rising emerald tide. Appetite, that's all the swamp is. And this colored boy just stood there, taking it all in with a look on his face that told me he didn't know places this backward still existed in those proud United States of his.

"And you?" I said. "What's your name?"

He glanced up, startled, and smiled the shiniest smile I ever saw, like a bright crescent moon waxing slowly toward full in the middle of his face. "I didn't mean to be rude, Mr. Decoteau. My name is Lucas Dixon. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." He took the stairs in a bound and shook my hand, smiling the whole time and looking me right in the eye, like a white man. Then he turned to gaze back at his car and the gravel road beyond it, tunneling off through the swamp like a mirage, green tinted and improbably dry. "I don't know how I ended up here. I was trying to reach Evangeline, I came up 31 from New Iberia — "

"You a long way from Evangeline and New Iberia both, boy."

"I can tell that. Question is: where *am* I?"

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just stood there in the heat. Sweat trickled into my eyes and when I went to brush it away, my hands trembled. A dark foreboding filled me. I sighed, cursing this Yankee nigger and his government job and whatever fate had seen fit to bring him here. And then I did what I knew I had to do.

"Sulphur Creek," I said. "I reckon you better come inside."

WHEN WE STEPPED INSIDE the store, Lucas Dixon paused, emitting a slow rising whistle, like a tea kettle just coming to a boil. "Wow," he said in a voice pitched just above a whisper, and I had that queer sense that I was seeing Sulphur Creek through his eyes again, a sepia-toned snapshot out of some lost past. Everything swam in green twilight: the bright moted squares of the windows, the sagging shelves of canned goods and tools, Hiram behind the counter, a shadow amid shadows. A ceiling fan shoved the smells of cheese and dust around.

Maybe a decade ago, I hauled a diesel generator back from Morgan

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City, dragging a scrap of the twentieth century home to Sulphur Creek just as the rest of the world lurched headlong toward the twenty-first. My daddy would have disapproved, but that fan felt just fine on a hot summer day. Even then, with everything else weighing on my mind, I couldn't help lifting my head to catch the air against my face.

I paused at the hardware counter to tell Hiram to fetch us a couple cold drinks from the cooler. When I turned around, I saw that Dixon had wandered over toward drygoods, where he was rubbing a bolt of cloth between two fingers and gazing about with an expression of thunderstruck delight on his face. "Wow!" he said again. He pivoted on his heels like a weathercock, uncurtaining all those shiny teeth. "I hope you won't take offense, Mr. Decoteau, but this place is a time capsule."

I didn't know what to say to that either, so I just ushered him in the direction of the rockers that sit back by the grocery counter. By the time I got him settled, Hiram had turned up with the sodas. We sat there sipping while Hiram stepped out to sweep off the front porch. "Nothin beats an ice-cold Coca-Cola on a hot day, does it," I said.

Dixon tilted his soda to his lips and took a long swig. "That's true, Mr. Decoteau. And it does get hot down here."

"Where bouts you from, then?"

"Albany, New York." He turned to face me. "I really *do* hope you don't take offense, Mr. Decoteau, but your store — " He gazed around appreciatively once again. " — your store is like a dream come true. I'm working on my Ph.D. over at LSU, specializing in the rural economy during Reconstruction, and this place, well, it's like stepping inside my dissertation."

"Your dissertation."

"That's right. History. " He gave me a shy smile. "It sounds ridiculous, I guess, but I *do* love history."

"Sign on your car says you work for the United States Census Bureau."

"That's just summer work. I track down non-responders, see if I can get them to answer a few questions. Did you fill out your census form, Mr. Decoteau?"

"Well, I — "

Lucas Dixon waved his hand. "Don't tell me. You thought it was an invasion of your privacy."

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"Well — "

"The thing people fail to understand," Dixon said, "is that the government uses that data to help people. Take that street out front. Using census data, you could probably get the funding to pave that street, put in some proper drainage." He'd been digging in his briefcase while he talked. Now he produced a thick file and began thumbing through it. "I know it's just summer work," he was saying, "but I like to think of the service I'm doing for history, gathering all these facts. I like to imagine some future historian...." He trailed off, his brow furrowing. "That's funny. Did you say the name of this place is Sulphur Creek?"

"That's right."

He studied the page for another moment and then looked up. "Sulphur Creek's not listed here. Did you even *get* a census form, Mr. Decoteau?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Di — "

"Lucas. Why don't you call me, Lucas?"

"We *do* value our privacy here in Sulphur Creek, Mr. Dixon. Lucas. That's what I brought you in here to tell you."

"I understand that, Mr. Decoteau. But census data is completely confiden — "

"We're just very private folk — "

Dixon rolled on over me. "I have some forms. We could take them around town, have people fill them out — "

"Mr. Dixon," I said sharply.

He paused, a little startled I think.

"Mr. Dixon," I said, softer now. "Lucas. I'm trying to make you understand something, see?"

"I'm just trying to help."

"I know. I know you are. But what would be best, what would be best for you and me both, is if you would just get in your car and get on out of here now. That's what I'm trying to say, you understand."

Lucas Dixon wavered. I could see him trying to work it out — not just my words, but the words behind my words, if you take my meaning — and for a moment I thought I had persuaded him. He slid his papers back into his briefcase, and just for the space it took him to latch the cover I let myself believe that I had managed everything just that neatly. A vivid

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little fantasy took hold of me. In the fantasy, Lucas Dixon thanked me for the Coke, walked out to his car, and drove back down the gravel road that had brought him here. I stood on the porch and listened as the sound of his engine faded, swallowed up in the sleepy buzz of the swamp.

But it was too late for that.

I heard the sound of boots on the porch, and the front screen whined on its hinges. Stelly Broussard and Avery Verrett came in. Their white faces hung disembodied in the gloom as they stared the length of the store.

"We came soon's we heard," Stelly said.

I got to my feet, nodding. "Stelly," I said. "Avery. This here is Lucas Dixon. "

Dixon stood, still clutching his satchel, and went to meet them. He held out his hand. Avery hesitated a moment — he never was too bright, Avery — and then he took the hand and shook it, ginger-like, the way a man picks up something that might be dead and then again might not be, something with teeth. Stelly just stood there, the moment spinning out awkwardly until Dixon at last drew his hand back. The whole thing like to make me sick.

"What the hell we gonna do, Armand?" Stelly said.

"Now just listen — " I started, but Dixon interrupted me.

"Maybe you're right, Mr. Decoteau. Maybe I'll just go after all."

Stelly Broussard didn't like the sound of that. His face kind of pinched in on itself, growing still harder and more hateful, and it had been plenty of both to begin with. He looked like a man who went to bite into a rind of sweet watermelon, and got a mouthful of lemon instead. Stelly's an old-timer like me, but his years in the swamp haven't worn him down the way they do some folks. Five decades of running traplines for nutria and muskrat had left him rangy and quick, impervious to injury. I've seen him take colored boys apart, they get the least bit uppity. He's got a way with those big hands of his, Stelly Broussard has.

"Now, don't be hasty," I said.

They just stood there, staring at me. Stelly was mad, and when Stelly was mad, Avery didn't know any better than to be mad, too. But Dixon... well, Dixon just seemed puzzled. A little nervous, maybe, but mainly puzzled. In his way, I think, Lucas Dixon was as dense as Avery Verrett ever thought about being.

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Me, I was thinking that if I could get Stelly alone, calm him down a little, I might find a way out of this yet. I didn't want to like Lucas Dixon, but somehow I couldn't help it. His words kept coming back to me —

— *it sounds ridiculous, Mr. Decoteau, but I* do *love history* —

— and getting tangled up inside my head with that gravel road cutting through the Atchafalaya, so clean and dry that God Himself might have put it there, and maybe He did. And then it came to me — not a solution, exactly, but a way to buy a little time.

"I've reconsidered your proposal, Mr. Dixon," I said, "seein as you're so dedicated and all." I turned to Stelly. "Mr. Dixon here says he might be able to get us a little money, maybe we can pave the street out front. He just needs to ask a few questions."

"What the hell we need with a paved street — "

"I was thinking maybe Avery could show him around a bit, let him ask a few questions, while you and me, Stelly, we have us a little talk."

I let my eyes bore into him, summoning up my daddy's ghost inside me. After a minute, Stelly turned away.

"You heard the man, Avery," he said.

"Where you want I should take him?"

"You take him round the better sort of folks for now," Stelly said.

Dixon frowned. "I need to count everyone, Mr. Decoteau."

"By and by. You let Avery show you around, you catch up with the rest this evening."

"This evening?"

"We havin a little *fais-dodo*. A little country dance, you know. History buff like yourself, you'll enjoy it. Avery'll bring you round."

Avery nodded. He pushed the door open, but Dixon held back, still clutching that bag of his. "Mr. Decoteau — "

"Don't you fret, Mr. Dixon. You go on and ask your questions. We'll get you on the right road soon enough."

He held my gaze a moment longer before he turned away. The screen door banged shut behind him, and then Stelly Broussard and I were alone.

Stelly stood there a moment, staring after them. The Sun slanting through the screen tattooed a grid of fine lines on his face. The air had that still, sleepy quality it gets late in the afternoon. The heat comes off the

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water in waves then, gilding everything with a faint damp sheen you can almost taste. The fan creaked. Hiram's broom made a steady rasp in the silence.

Stelly grunted. He turned and came the length of the room, his boots calling up echoes in the stillness. "You see that road out there?"

"I seen it."

"A road." He shook his head. "A goddamn road."

I lowered myself gingerly into my rocker. I had never felt older or wearier. I could have curled up and slept right there in my chair and never woke up again, and glad to do it, too. But Stelly wouldn't let me.

"What we gonna do, Armand?"

"I don't know, Stelly. I'm thinkin on it, don't you see."

"Thinkin!" He laughed, a short ugly bark, without humor.

"Why don't you sit down?"

"Sit down," he said. He leveled one blunt finger at me, right in my face. The finger shook. "You know what, Armand? I'm right tired of you tellin everybody what to do."

"What are you doin here, then?"

Stelly cursed and turned away. The silence held for a while. I could feel the pulse beating at my temple.

Stelly sighed. "Hell, Armand. I've known you all my life. All I'm sayin is that maybe you're losin your heart to do what you have to do. Take this business with Billy Go — "

"I did what was necessary, didn't I?"

"You *let* it be done. You didn't have the stomach to do it yourself."

I didn't have any answer to that. I just sat there, rocking a little, lifting my face to the fan. I closed my eyes, willing it all away. But it wouldn't go, and I knew it wouldn't go. For sixty-odd years now, I'd been closing my eyes and willing it all away, and it wouldn't ever go. It was always there around me: the store that had been my daddy's store and his daddy's store and on and on all the way back to the day of Mr. Jefferson Davis himself and before that even, each successive generation of Decoteaus treading deeper the groove that ran behind the grocery counter and down either side of the store to drygoods and hardware. The store was always there, and beyond that the town, and beyond that the swamp, huge and dangerous and stranger than most anyone could know

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or guess. And beyond that? Another world, that's what. Now a little piece of that world named Lucas Dixon had settled here among us, blown willy nilly down that gravel road from nowhere, and I would have to decide what to do about him.

All I wanted to do was shut my eyes.

But Sulphur Creek kept crashing in. In the ring of Stelly Broussard's boots on the floor Hiram had polished to a high gloss that very morning and in the labored sigh he made as he settled into the rocker beside me and in the faint stale odor of his breath, like a still pool that has lain too long in the shadow of a willow, where the Sun can't reach — in all that and more, Sulphur Creek came crashing in upon me.

Stelly plucked at my sleeve. "I knew your daddy, too, Armand — "

"You leave him out of this."

"Well he wouldn't have approved, you can be sure enough of that." He studied the floor for a minute. Then, lifting his face so that the light fell across it, he said, "Maybe you done enough, Armand, that's all I'm sayin. Maybe it's time to let this burden pass to someone else."

"You volunteerin, Stelly?"

He didn't answer.

"Because if you're volunteerin, you might want to ask yourself what it is you're volunteerin for. It's more than keepin the likes of Odile Halloway in line and organizin the *fais-dodo* come Saturday night."

"I spent my life in the swamp."

"I ain't talkin about your pissant nutria and muskrat lines, Stelly. I'm talkin about seein that everybody has a little somethin to eat come nightfall. I'm talkin about the supply run down Morgan City, the long run through the deep, strange water farther out than you ever tried to go. The night closes in around you out there, Stelly. You hear things like no other man ever heard before, and sometimes you see them too. Eight or ten times a year, I make that run, and it ain't never the same."

"I ain't afraid of nothin."

"You're a bigger fool than I took you for, then."

Stelly jerked his head up, his eyes blazing, and his fingers tightened on the arms of his chair until I thought the wood might splinter under the pressure. He got to his feet stiffly. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll leave it to you for now, Armand. But we both know what

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has to be done. Mark my words: if you ain't willin to see it through, there's some who will."

He didn't look back as he strode to the door.

The screen swung shut behind him. I felt wrung out and weary, and when I lifted my Coke to my lips I found it had gone brackish and warm. After a time, I realized that the sound of Hiram's sweeping had died away. I got to my feet and went to the door. Hiram sat on the steps with the broom propped between his knees, staring out at Lucas Dixon's motor car and the gravel road beyond it, veering off through the swamp to a place Hiram had never seen. "Now look here, Hiram," I started, but when he lifted his face to mine, I just let the words trail off. I couldn't find it in my heart to scold him.

NIGHT NEVER LEAVES the Atchafalaya, she just lies up through the heat of the day, same as the rest of the swamp creatures. Live in the swamp long enough, you'll see her pooled in the deep cypress groves or hiding out in the black depths of a mangrove thicket, patient and sure, biding her time. Now and then, you'll catch a glimpse of her in midday, in the wind-driven shudder of a palmetto leaf or in the languid dapple of Spanish moss, draping the trees like castoff wedding finery, ivory veils aging slowly to an antique gray. Then the Sun starts down. Slowly, imperceptibly, night takes hold. She steals invisibly across the water, like smoke; she spills out from the wells of shadow beneath our houses. Night's like love. She creeps in and takes possession of everything you ever knew or hoped to know without so much as a by your leave. She takes dominion of your heart before you ever know she's there.

I woke in darkness, relieved, thinking I had dreamed it all — that crazy road appearing out of nowhere and Lucas Dixon and the sign stuck on the door of his car, that one that spelled doom sure as I could feel the blood coursing in my veins. The windows were black and the intermittent gusts from the fan carried a chill that hadn't been there before. Night had claimed Sulphur Creek, carrying with it faint strains of music.

The *fais-dodo* had gotten underway. I heaved myself out of my chair and ambled over to look through the screen. At the edge of the porch, Booger lifted his head and yawned. The music was louder here, a fiddle and

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a ting-a-ling and Louis Mayard's high tenor, lifted in some old Cajun song. Down the street a way, Ruby Lafitte's place was lit up like a jack-o'-lantern. Folks gathered on the porch, drinking and talking in the smoky radiance from within.

I yawned and gave myself a good scratching. Then I opened the screen door, letting it bang shut behind me. Startled voices rose out of the shadows below the porch, a tangle of words in which a single phrase —

" — *Shit*, Odile — "

— stood out unmistakably. A car door slammed and boys scattered into darkness like a covey of startled quail. I caught a glimpse of Odile Halloway and I felt a little twinge of sorrow, knowing that he was starting down the same doomed path Billy Go had taken before him. It sickened me a little, to tell you the truth. And it sickened me even more to know that I hadn't been dreaming after all. That gravel road was still there, and so was Lucas Dixon's car. One door still stood open where them boys had been peering in at the dash. A light was shining inside.

I stepped down off the porch and shut the door, and then I stood there, staring up the street toward Ruby's place. I felt strange and haunted, somehow. Someone stood at my shoulder, but I didn't turn around. I knew better than that.

"Daddy," I said by way of greeting.

Words came in response and I couldn't say whether they were coming out of memory, or from some other place, some cold, cold place where words formed slow and hard as diamonds if they formed at all. They were Daddy's words, though, and I remembered when he said them. He was already an old man, then, and I think we both knew he didn't have much time.

They'll come a time, he said, *you'll have to do somethin you won't want to do, Armand. But you'll have to do it, anyway, because that's what a man does.*

I sighed and started up the street toward Ruby's place.

As I drew near Ruby's, I could pick out the words in Louis's song, an old Cajun lament. Someone spotted me from the porch and called out, "Hey there, Armand," and a chorus of greetings followed. The regulars had gathered on the porch to play cards, same as always. Oil lanterns flickered

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atop Ruby's faded porch furniture and Eunice Ray bustled around freshening drinks, her dark skin glossy with sweat. The air smelled of whiskey and tobacco, smells that reminded me of my daddy, rocking there on the front porch of the store, staring out across Sulphur Creek like he owned the place. I caught a glimpse of Stelly, his chair cocked back against the wall with its front legs off the ground. He nodded over his cards.

"Deal you in, Armand?" someone asked.

"Thank you, no."

As I started toward the stairs, somebody plucked at my sleeve. Turning, I saw Hiram's long face peering around the corner. I let him draw me into the shadows at the side of the house. Through the windows, I watched Eduis Frugé pumping away on his squeeze box. They'd pushed Ruby's furniture back along the walls. Dancers whirled in the clear space, their faces shiny as new money.

"You ain't got enough to do, you gotta skulk around out here, Hiram?"

"I been waitin for you."

"Waitin? You know where to find me."

"I'se ascared to come back down the store, Mistah Armand."

The light from inside touched up half his face, leaving the other side in shadow. I couldn't see much but the angle of his jaw, and the white of his eye above it, marbled and weepy looking in the darkness. His lower lip trembled.

"Scared. Why's that?"

"Odile and them others. If I'se to say anything, they said they'd whip up on me."

I took a step toward him. "What are you talkin about?"

"They gonna steal that colored man's automobile." He stumbled a little over the unfamiliar word. "Said they's done sick and tired of Sulphur Creek, said they's gonna break Billy Go loose and just drive on outta here."

"Billy Go, huh?"

Hiram nodded. "You allus treat me right, Mistah Armand, and I thought you ought to know, but I sure am ascared."

"You ain't got nothin to fear, Hiram."

"They said they'd whip up — "

"Hush now. That colored boy, Dixon, you seen him inside?"

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"Yes, sir."

"What about Janie Halloway?"

"She in the kitchen."

"All right, then. You go on and lend a hand. I'll step back there in a minute and have a word with her. And don't you worry none, Odile wouldn't know how to drive that car even if he could get it started, you hear? I'll take care of Odile Halloway, you ain't got nothin to fear from the likes of him."

"Yes, sir." He hesitated.

"What is it?"

"Odile, he say there's a whole world full a them automobiles outside the bayou, Mistah Armand. Say all kinds of colored folk drive em and ain't nobody to say a word about it."

For some reason, the words moved me. It was nothin I could put into words, but I felt a little twist inside me all the same. Hiram had been working in the store since he weren't but knee high to a grasshopper, and I guess I'd gotten accustomed to him. I never took a wife and I've brought no children into this world, but I'd taken a shine to Hiram, even if he were just a colored boy. I wanted to say something to comfort him, but I couldn't seem to find the words. Finally, I just reached out and touched him on the shoulder. "Don't you put no stock in Odile Halloway," I said. "He ain't nothin but swamp gas and bother, that one. Now run along."

Hiram stared at me a moment longer, and then he melted back into the darkness. Inside, the music quickened, Louis's voice rising to a doleful wail. *Quel espoir, quel espoir*, he sang as the song climaxed in a flurry of whoops and claps. In the silence that followed, I felt that presence at my shoulder once again. This time, though, I didn't say a word. I just spat into the dirt, and as the music started up again, I trudged back around the house.

Out front, the old-timers were still at it. Stelly fixed me with his gaze and let his chair legs thump to the floor as I mounted the stairs. A couple of the card-players glanced up, too, men I'd known all my life. And now I saw something in their eyes I hadn't noticed before: a feral sheen of expectation. Stelly's words came back to me —

— *you ain't willin to see it through, there's some who will* —

— as I brushed past them and yanked the screen open. The dance floor

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was crowded like it always was, but everything seemed slightly off-kilter, the music a hair more frantic than usual, the dancers somehow reckless, as if they couldn't move fast enough — as if they were dancing with the devil hindmost and hell before em. A smell of whiskey and chicken gumbo hung in the air, and the sticky press of too many bodies in too small a space. I nodded at folks as I slipped by, aiming for the kitchen and Janie Halloway.

"Mr. Decoteau!"

Somebody tugged at my sleeve. I turned and there was Lucas Dixon, still cradling that battered leather case. He hovered at the edge of the dance floor. Folks veered about him to the left and right. They studied him askance, never quite meeting his eyes. He seized my hand. If he was aware of the stir he was causing, he didn't show it.

"Mr. Decoteau," he said, his voice pitched so I could hear him above the music. "Mr. Verrett — Avery? — he told me you're the one I needed to talk to."

"Me?"

"Are you the mayor of Sulphur Creek, Mr. Decoteau?"

"Mayor? No, I'm — " I paused, thinking how to put it into words. A place like Sulphur Creek, the store is more than just a store. Day after day, year after year, women gossip across its counters, children crowd its aisles, old men gather to whittle on the porch. A man stands behind that counter long enough, he becomes...well, more than just another man. Folks look to him, somehow. It had been true of my father and it was true of me, too. It weren't nothing official. It just *was*, because that's the way it always had been. But there didn't seem to be any way to make Dixon understand any of that. I sighed. "I'm just the storekeep, that's all, Mr. Dixon."

Dixon nodded as if maybe he understood. "Well, Mr. Verrett said I was to talk to you."

"What was it you wanted to ask me about?"

"I was thinking if you put in a word for me, maybe people would loosen up a little. Most of them, they don't want to answer my questions at all."

"We're private folk, I told you that."

"The questions aren't intrusive. How many people in your household,

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stuff like that, nothing personal at all." He stepped closer, leaning toward me and lowering his voice. "And that's not all. It's the black people, especially. I saw them here and there today, but I never got a chance to ask them any questions. When I got here, I stepped back into the kitchen — I've just got a few questions, it wouldn't take a minute — and they wouldn't even acknowledge me."

I stared at him for a moment, knowing now that I'd made a mistake, that I should have sent him packing right away, knowing too that that wouldn't have been a solution. There was no solution. Or there was one, and Stelly Broussard was right: I couldn't stomach it.

"Mr. Decoteau?"

"I'll say a word to them," I said. I turned to go, but he tugged at my shoulder.

His face was solemn. "This is a fascinating place, Mr. Decoteau."

"How's that?"

"No cars, no power-lines, no televisions. Not even a radio. I haven't seen a radio all day. People act like they barely know what I'm talking about. The ones who would even talk to me at all, that is, and not many of them did." Dixon stared at the dance floor. Then he turned his gaze back to mine. "Do you think it's because I'm black, Mr. Decoteau?"

"I shouldn't like to say that, Mr. Dixon."

"Well, I wouldn't either, but this place...."

The music wound itself to a crescendo and died away amid scattered applause. In the silence, there was a metallic clatter in the kitchen. I felt the weight of the room's attention swing past, two dozen pairs of eyes skating across my back without ever quite coming to rest. Ernest Fortier ran his bow across his strings, Louis counted out the time, "*Un, deux, trois*," and the band swung into something new.

Dixon said, "I saw what looked like a little jail today, just one room in the woods behind your store."

I stiffened. "Avery didn't take you down there, did he?"

"No. Nor would he answer my questions when I asked about it. Why is that, Mr. Decoteau?"

I felt a sick smile plaster itself across my face. "Well, we wouldn't want to expose you to the criminal element here in Sulphur Creek, Mr. Dixon. It wouldn't be hospitable, now would it?"

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"Maybe not, but it made me think, anyway."

He had my attention now. "Think of what?"

"Just how isolated you folks are. This place is like a whole different world." Dixon licked his lips. "I hope you don't take offense, Mr. Decoteau, but Sulphur Creek is a fine opportunity for field work."

"Field work?"

"Data gathering. Historical studies, anthropology, you name it. When I get back with the census data, you're going to get some attention. I've never heard of an entire town being forgotten like this." He smiled, a chastened smile that reminded me somehow of Hiram, shyly inquiring about the possibility of another world. "But I'm not fooling you, am I? I guess you know I'm really thinking in selfish terms. Of my dissertation. This place is a real opportunity. It's like stepping back in history."

I felt stiff and cold suddenly, like it was mid-January and I'd missed a step in the swamp, plunging deep into the dank chill waters of the Atchafalaya. His words buzzed around in my head like bees, alighting now and then to dip their stingers in my brain. I kept thinking of Hiram. Hiram and Billy Go and Odile Halloway.

"There's some parts of history you don't want to step into," I said when I could get my works unfroze.

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head. "Forget it. I don't mean nothin. Nothin at all."

The words came out harsher than I'd intended them, and something stirred in Lucas Dixon's face, a kind of comprehension. I saw it happen. I saw his gaze slide away and come to rest at a point just over my left shoulder, a point where he could take in the room at a single glance, conscious for the first time maybe of the dearth of black faces on the dance floor, of the way the ones who *were* there hugged the edges of the room, carrying drinks to the folks who sprawled across Ruby Lafitte's sagging furniture. He stepped back, his face puzzled, and all at once it was too much for me, Lucas Dixon and Stelly Broussard and the ghost of my daddy always at my shoulder. The music buffeted me. My head throbbed. I needed to step back a minute, I needed a little time to regroup.

I lifted a hand. "There's someone I need to see," I said. "Just give me a minute, I'll be right back."

I turned away before he could answer, ducking into the kitchen. The

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heat from the stove enveloped me, sweltering, and the spicy fragrance of the gumbo grew abruptly stronger. My gut twisted. I propped myself against the wall, tipped my head back, and shut my eyes, waiting for the nausea to pass. I found myself longing for my store. I pictured it in my head, the fan turning and turning in the dark above me, breathing winter down into my upturned face. I took a deep breath, felt the world settle into place around me.

I opened my eyes. The kitchen bustled with activity. Colored women worked at the counters or hurried back and forth through the door into the main room, their hands full. Hiram stirred a simmering pot of gumbo at the stove. A baby was crying in the adjoining *parc aux petits*. I glimpsed its nanny through the open door, cradling a squirming bundle against her bosom, her dark face gentle as she walked it patiently back and forth among the sleeping children.

A clatter drew my attention. Janie Halloway turned from capping a big pot of rice on the stove, and from the way her face wrinkled when she saw me, I knew Hiram had been carrying tales out of school. Normally, I'd have scolded him, but I didn't have the heart for it just now. His face kept getting mixed up inside my head with Lucas Dixon's face, and for some reason I found myself thinking of the son I'd never had, how disappointed my father would have been, and how he would have asked me who was going to take over the store when I was gone? Who was going to make the runs to Morgan City then? I didn't know, but I didn't care much either, so long as I never had to tell a son of mine that he'd have to do things he didn't have the stomach for, because that was the price of being a man.

Janie Halloway stood before me, stout and tall, her broad face unlined even as she closed in on fifty. "He's jest a boy, Mistah Armand, that's all he ever was."

"Janie," I said. "You and I both know that Odile has to learn — "

"And if he don't?" She looked up, suddenly fierce, her voice a desperate whisper. "You gonna do to Odile what you did to Billy, Mistah Armand? Is that what you gonna do? Cause I got to tell you, Mistah Armand, I couldn't take it. I couldn't take losin Odile, too."

"Now, Janie — " I said, and then the tears welling up in her eyes spilled over, tracking slowly down her face. Just like that, I felt all the fight go out of me. I clasped her by the shoulders and tried to draw her close, but

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she stiffened, holding herself away, and the words came unbidden, rising to my lips the way words rise up when you cradle a weeping child, the way they surface out of some lost well of ages, these words of comfort that the first mother used maybe and which you too use, in this hour of need when only words can salve the ache inside you, though you've never so much as held a child before. "Don't you take on, now, Janie, we're gonna find us a way to take care of Odile. Ain't nothin gonna happen to Odile."

"You swear, Mistah Armand?"

"I swear," I said, and I felt it close around us, that promise, like a knot that's been soaked in icy water, the fibers shrinking down and binding us together there in the stifling kitchen. I felt it close around us like a noose.

I stood there a moment longer, gathering my strength, and then I released her. When I stepped back into the main room, Lucas Dixon was gone.

I PUSHED THROUGH the crowded dance floor to the door, the music dying into silence as people turned to stare after me. He wasn't on the porch either. A sick premonition had seized me, and I stumbled down the steps toward the street, ignoring the confused snippets of talk —

" — steady there, Armand — "

" — what's the matter now — "

— that floated after me. And then I was running, though I was far too old to run. An enormous swollen Moon had hove halfway above the horizon, pouring through the trees a deluge of orange light like the swamp itself had caught fire. The breeze-combed cypress and live oak screening the far end of town hurled down twisty spokes of shadow, and strange phantoms capered along the weed-clotted ruts of the street, as though a hellmouth itself had gaped open, releasing the souls of demons and sinners alike for a midnight frolic. My store loomed against the night sky, throwing its queer elongated shadow across the gleaming hulk of Dixon's car. In the distance, on the other side of a patch of marshy scrub, I could glimpse the little bunker we used as a jail house.

By the time I saw the thing that tripped me up — Lucas Dixon's leather satchel, spilling a sheaf of loose census forms into the street — it was too late. I went tumbling head over tea-kettle into the shadows by the

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porch, the wire grass reaching up to poke at me with a thousand prickly fingers. As I stumbled to my knees, aching from the fall, the wind picked up, whipping Dixon's papers into a narrow funnel. It held its shape for a split second before it came apart. One of the forms plastered itself flapping across my face, momentarily blinding me. Strong hands lifted me to my feet. The wind snatched the paper loose, whirling it away into the dark.

It was Billy Go that held my shoulders. Billy Go, a great hulking man with skin the color of night and handsome negroid features and big mournful eyes that held me fixed for a moment. Only his name wasn't Billy Go, was it? No, and it never had been, though we'd all taken to calling him that these last few years, because Billy, he wouldn't stay. But the name he'd been born to was Billy Halloway, and he had his mother's eyes, and his mother's round, smooth face, and the beads of perspiration glistening on his cheeks might have been his mother's tears. He must have been thirty years old by then, but looking at him there, bare-torsoed in the moonlight with a pair of canvas trousers cinched around his waist, I saw only the boy I'd known so many years ago, when he used to help out around the store, before all his troubles beset him, and Hiram came in to spell him for a while and somehow just never left.

"Billy," I whispered.

"Mistah Armand," he said.

In the silence, a group of boys emerged from the shadows. Odile Halloway stood in front, looking like a slimmed-down version of his older brother. The De Soto boys trailed along behind him: Marcus, a willowy young nigger who never said much, and Clifton, a rangy caramel-colored boy with one eye normal and the other like an island, stranded in a sea of purple birthmark that spilled out across one cheek to lap at the corner of his mouth. The census taker stumbled between them, dragging his feet as Marcus and Clifton yanked him forward.

A savage anger boiled up inside me at the sight of him. "You just had to go off and have a look at the jail, didn't you?" I snarled. "You and your damned questions, can't leave people well enough alone."

"Now, hush up, Mistah Armand," Billy said gently, drawing me closer, and he kind of winced when he did it. A scab cracked open under his arm, spilling a little rivulet of blood down his side, and Stelly's words —

— you let it be done, you didn't have the stomach to do it yourself —

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— came back to me in a rush. A taste as bitter as day-old coffee grounds filled my mouth. I looked away, the anger sieving through me as suddenly as it had filled me up, leaving nothing behind but a sour residue of shame.

"You know how I always hated to see em hurt you, Billy," I whispered.

"But they always end up hurtin me jest the same, don't they? I run off and you white mens fetch me back and there you stand noddin your head all mournful like and sayin I sure hate to see em hurt you, Billy, I surely do, but somehow it never make no difference in the end."

"You stop runnin off, that'd make a difference. You could have a good life here. Your mama has a good life."

"My mama ain't free, Mistah Armand. Ain't none of us free."

"That what you want, Billy, no matter what it takes?"

"Thass right, Mistah Armand. No matter what it take."

Odile stepped forward, then, laying a hand across Billy's shoulder. Billy winced again, and when he winced, time slipped around me for a moment. I saw the lash spiral out against the morning sky, like a black snake thrashing in the Sun. I saw him flinch away from the whipping post as it descended. I saw the blood, red as any white man's blood.

"Time we be goin, Billy," Odile said. "That strange nigger gonna drive us right on outta here." He jerked his chin over his shoulder. Marcus and Clifton moved toward the car, leading the census taker between them. Odile's gaze settled on my face. "We fixin to leave now, Mistah Armand, and you want to be real quiet. I would hate to have to hurt you, but I will do it. You make me, I will do it. You understand me?"

His eyes were as cold and black as the eyes of a gar, and I saw that he meant it. I nodded.

"Billy," Odile said.

Billy turned me loose, smoothing my shirt where he had gripped it. He held my gaze for the space of a heartbeat, letting me remember the polite young man I'd taken into the store all those years ago, letting me see that nothing had happened to that boy despite all the scars men like Stelly Broussard had carved into his flesh since then. He was still right there, that boy, and I wondered that I hadn't noticed him before, knowing with a kind of looming sickness that I hadn't let myself. He nodded, and turned away.

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Odile stared at me a moment longer, his face expressionless, and then he followed his brother.

The other boys had slipped into the car by then, easing shut the doors as silently as ghosts. Lucas Dixon stared out at me through the driver's side window, his face slack with shock. Odile and Billy Go were halfway to the car when it happened. "Start it up, now," Odile hissed, and Dixon twisted the key. As the engine coughed to life, Booger tore out from under the porch, barking like his feet were on fire and his tail was catching. Odile lunged toward me, his face twisting. "Shut up that dog, Mistah A — "

He never finished the sentence. Instead a startled look stole across his moonlit features. He hung there, seeming to defy gravity for a moment, and then he pitched forward, thrashing like a man in a fit. In the same instant I heard the shot echoing away into the swamp. By the time it died, Odile Halloway had fallen still.

Billy Go sobbed and hunkered down beside his brother, his hands outstretched.

I twisted my head toward Ruby's place.

The whole town had drifted into the street in my wake, black and white alike, sixty or seventy people I suppose there must have been. Stelly Broussard stood at their head, a dark shape, faceless, like a paper doll hewn out of night and propped up against the blood-red ovoid of that colossal Moon. As he lowered the rifle, a little ribbon of blue smoke curled away from the barrel.

"We thought he was goin for you, Armand," Stelly said.

"I reckon you did," I said.

After that, we just stood in silence because there was nothing else to say. The swamp rose up around us and drew us in, clamoring with noise and beauty and the ripe rich stink of death, and the world rolled on beyond it, worlds upon worlds, every one of them wheeling around on the axis of this moment.

Janie Halloway stumbled out of the crowd and went to her knees beside Billy Go, sobbing helplessly over his brother's body. She cradled the dead boy's head and lifted her face to the sky. "Odile!" she screamed. "Odile!"

Something twisted deep inside my guts.

And then the census taker's automobile lurched into gear.

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* * *

The engine shrieked as the car backed swiftly away, throwing up chunks of sod and wire grass. I caught a glimpse of the interior as it flew past. The two Sulphur Creek boys in the back seat stared out at me, their eyes wide, their mouths gaping in astonishment. But Lucas Dixon never spared me a glance. His knuckles whitened as he fought the wildly spinning wheel. His face was a mask of shock and terror.

And then he was gone, whipping the car around backwards in a long arc, leaving me to stare after him through a cloud of exhaust. "Wait!" I hollered, waving my arms, and for half a second, as I watched the car shudder to a halt, I thought he'd heard me. I thought he was listening. Then lights flickered on the rear end and gears clashed. The car surged forward, weaving like a man with a skinful of liquor. Its headlights carved the dark as it picked up speed. I suppose Lucas Dixon must have seen it at the same time I did: the gravel road he had come in on was gone.

It had just flat disappeared.

The swamp surrounded us, closing the town in the way it always had. Water glimmered in the moonlight, and the cypress trees hunkered on their knees and lifted their arms to the sky. Lucas Dixon screamed. The car veered suddenly, the engine roaring. It went over the bank at full speed. Water foamed up around it like the froth on a bucket of fresh-churned milk. It had risen to the door handles by the time I drew close, the breath heaving in my lungs.

The back doors opened and the De Soto brothers came wading out, looking scared and remorseful. But Lucas Dixon never moved. He just sat there, staring out through the windshield, his hands still clenching the wheel. Even after I splashed out after him, he didn't look at me for a long time. He was sobbing quietly. Big fat tears rolled down his cheeks. His lips trembled as he turned his face to mine.

"Come on, now," I said. "Don't you fret."

It took me a minute to pry the door open and haul him out, dead-weight. Mud sucked at my boots. My pants clung to me like a second skin. Stelly Broussard was waiting on the shore like a man carved of ice. The moonlight shone on everything, gilding the leaves and the faces of the throng that stood behind him and the blued steel barrel of his rifle, which I'd hauled back myself one night on the long, strange run from Morgan City.

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"You let him go, he'll bring folks back from outside," Stelly said. "And then where we gonna be, Armand, you thought of that?"

"And how they ever find their way? The swamp, it's always changing, you can't never come the same way twice."

I started to shrug past him, but he stepped in front of me. He lifted the gun. I stared down into it, the machined bore spiraling down into a blackness just the color of death.

"*You* always find a way, don't you?" he said. "You let that boy go where he can talk, them nigger-lovin sons a bitches'll find it, too. They won't rest until they do, and you know it's true, Armand, just like your daddy knowed it before you."

"You gonna shoot me, Stelly?"

He stared at me for a long time. Then I reached out and pushed the barrel of the rifle toward the ground.

"I'm takin this boy out of here," I said.

I gathered Lucas Dixon's weight on my shoulder and started limping back toward town. The crowd parted before me silently, leaving a long path at my rear, and it was down that path that Stelly Broussard called out to me.

"What the hell am I supposed to do, Armand? Why don't you tell me that?"

I didn't look back.

"You figure it out yourself, Stelly. You been doin all right so far."

GOD HELP ME, I took him into the swamp.

I untied my daddy's boat and I poled him deep into the night water, same as my daddy had done with me, all those years before. Just looking at him, hunkered shivering and silent in the bow, brought it all back, the night and the swamp and my daddy strong and silent in the stern. The deck groaned under a load of nutria and muskrat pelts for the Morgan City trade, and the dark sang out mysteriously around me. I was twelve years old, and as I watched the Moon rise orange and bloated through the cypress and tupelo-gum, my mind drifted to the stories I'd heard at my nanny's knee, tales of ha'nts and spirits, of the cursed souls called *loup-garous*, and of the Alligator King, a hundred-foot behemoth that could rise unseen from his watery lair and reduce a pirogue to kindling with a single snap of his great jaws. An

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obscure terror seized me, and even now, all these years later, that terror hasn't fully passed.

For the bayou is different in the night than it is in the day. The heat dies back, and the smell of the place grows stronger, a rank wild musk of vigor and decay, of yellow-blooming rushes and purple hyacinth and black mangrove striving up and dying back into the mire that nourished it. The night chorus begins to sing, frogs and lubbers and crickets, and occasionally you'll catch a glimpse of the rarest creatures of the Atchafalaya — a bear or a bobcat or the great white flag of a snowy egret hurling itself into the velvet dark with a thunder of mighty wings.

Time slows and the night stretches out forever. The water never takes the same path twice, and your mind turns funny on you, and maybe it's more than your mind. Maybe the whole world turns strange in the long black reach between midnight and dawn, when a stillness moves over the face of the waters and you hear the distant shriek of a loon, like a woman screaming, or the current parting as a gator glides from a rotten log to hunt the moonspun dark.

I was twelve years old, and I hunkered shivering under a blanket, knowing that my time too was drawing near. Knowing for the first time maybe how brief a life was, like a struck match flaring up for a fitful instant in the black well of eternity, and dying back in the same long breath of air. Knowing that my daddy would pass like his daddy had before him, and a time would come that it would fall to me and me alone, this long night passage to Morgan City.

Something huge lumbered off through the undergrowth, and a thin high cry drifted out of the void, a cry older than time. I lifted my face to the sky, and saw that we had left the world I'd known behind.

Two Moons hung like Christmas bulbs in the endless deep, and a vast leathery shadow passed far overhead, cruising the night sky on enormous outstretched wings. Its great beak clacked open and once again that unearthly voice rang down the heavens. I felt the terror strong upon me then. I turned to face my father, throwing back the blanket he had draped across my shoulders. "Where are we?" I asked.

It was that same question that Lucas Dixon put to me now. His face was bleached out and he was shaking, the way a man does when the fever's on him. I saw that he'd been in a kind of shock for all this time, brooding on

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what he'd seen, and now he'd come to some resolve. He'd decided to face the thing. I felt another little surge of respect for him, for the courage that had driven him suddenly to turn and face me there from the front of the boat.

"That road," he said. "It just disappeared." He shivered and stared off into the night for a while, and when he turned back to me, his face had a haunted, hunted look. "What kind of place *is* this, Mr. Decoteau?"

I'd spent years pondering that question. But it was my father's answer that I gave him, for it's the only answer I could ever come to in all those sleepless nights. Swamp is older than any man, I said, and powerful, the most powerful place there is, maybe. It is sky and land, it is dry and wet, it is earth and air and water and a powerful strong *hoodoo* bound deep in the place where they all three come together. The swamp is many rivers, I said, all flowing and mingling together and changing, always changing.

My father believed the same was true of all times and all worlds and all places that have ever been or might be yet. There are many worlds, he told me, many lines of possibility, more than any man can comprehend maybe, and they mingle in the swamp like rivers, always flowing, always changing, with Sulphur Creek at the center, alone unchanged in all the years since the first Decoteau settled here, striding deliberately out of the same world that Lucas Dixon had stumbled out of, in a time two centuries before Lucas Dixon's birth. It happens: some poor fool gets swept all unawares into a river of possibility and winds up in a place he could never imagine. And there are those few, the Decoteaus among them when our blood breeds true, who can sense those shifting currents of force in their bones, and navigate them.

"You took a wrong turn and drove down a road into the heart of everything," I told him. "And when you went to drive back out again, that road was gone. The swamp had swallowed it up. You can't ever come the same way twice."

Lucas Dixon stared up at me, his face washed clean with a wonder and terror so pure and dumb that I could hardly plumb it. Moonlight glinted in his spectacles, silvering over his eyes. "Am I lost forever then?"

I didn't answer for a long time. I just stared down into his face, thinking of him in that first moment in my store, pivoting to take it all in, unable to believe the dumb luck that had brought him to my door. *I* do *love history, Mr. Decoteau*, he'd said, and in that moment he'd seemed so

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young, so fresh and overflowing with enthusiasm. It put me in mind of Hiram somehow, hungry for things he didn't even know were out there. My mind filled up with faces, with Odile Halloway and Billy Go and Stelly Broussard, his voice tightening like a drum as he said *You let it be done, you didn't have the stomach to do it yourself.* I thought of Janie Halloway, then, and the price you sometimes had to pay to be a man.

"Mr. Decoteau?"

I felt my daddy's presence at my shoulder. I thought I might weep.

"We're all lost," I said.

Dawn hung in the trees like gauze by the time I got back to Sulphur Creek, pushing my way steadily along the channel, feeling the ache of muscle in my shoulders. Stelly Broussard waited on the landing behind my store. When I got close, he leaned out and hauled me in. He looped the stays around their posts and steadied the boat as I stepped out.

I brushed past him, moving toward the store.

He stopped me at the door.

"Armand," he said.

I turned to look at him, thinking of the way this place had shaped us both over the long decades since we were boys. He was big and grizzled and there were crow's feet around his eyes from staring long hours into the swamp and squinting at the Sun flashing off the water. It was like looking in a mirror.

"Armand, I just wanted — " He hesitated. "I just — "

"I know," I said. I touched his shoulder and turned away. I went inside then, through the dark storage room and into the front, my feet finding the grooves laid down in the wood by all the Decoteaus who had come before me. I lowered myself into my rocker and lifted my face to the ceiling. The fan still turned patiently up there. I felt the cool air against my cheeks, gentle as a benediction.

Hiram woke me from a dream-haunted sleep when he came in after nine. "Miz Halloway been askin for you," he told me.

"I reckon she has been," I said.

I pushed myself wearily out of my seat. Booger looked up yawning from the porch, and I reached down to pat him before I started up the street. The Halloways lived in an old cabin behind Ruby's place. The door opened as I mounted the steps.

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Inside it smelled of flowers and the press of Negroes thronging the little room and the kerosene lanterns burning behind the closed shades. I heard the story from Janie Halloway herself, there in the crowded parlor: how she'd run up to Ruby's for some thread to mend Odile's Sunday shirt, and how they'd got to talking and crying as women will, how when she'd started back at last she'd seen the chair overturned on the porch as she came through the trees. For a moment she hadn't understood. It was nothing special, after all, just a plain old kitchen chair, but she couldn't figure how it had come to be there, or why it filled her so with dread to see it lying on its side like that. And then she understood at last, and knowing already what Billy Go had done and why he had done it, she lifted her face to look at him, swinging slowly from the rafters.

She had laid them out in their finest things, both her boys. I stood looking down into Billy Go's swollen face for a long time, thinking back on the days when he used to help out around the store. At last, I reached down and touched his cold hand with my own. Then I turned away, hoping that he'd found some peace at last, now that he was finally free.

There isn't much left to tell.

We go on the same as we've always done here in Sulphur Creek, trapping and hunting and dancing on Saturday nights. Seven or eight times a year, I load up my daddy's boat and set out for Morgan City, trading nutria and muskrat pelts for the few things we can't make on our own.

Most days I get through just fine without ever sparing the census taker a thought. Other days are harder, though, and on those days I walk out toward the edge of town where for the space of a single afternoon a gravel road found its way to the heart of everything, here in Sulphur Creek.

The car's still there, sunk to its windows in water. I stand on the bank, staring out at it and thinking of Lucas Dixon and our night in the Atchafalaya and the price you have to pay to call yourself a man. The car's seen better days. Great patches of rust have started eating away at the hood, and kids throwing rocks have busted out most of the glass. Someday, I guess, it'll disappear altogether. Daddy was right about that too, like he was right about so many things. Give it time enough, the swamp eats anything. Anything at all. ☙

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

BIG WAVE SURFING

RECENTLY, the Exploratorium* decided to do a web page about surfing *(http://www.exploratorium.edu/theworld/surfing)*. Paul, as one of the museum's senior scientists, was called upon to research the science of surfing. This meant traveling to the beach and riding some waves while thinking about wavelength and wave velocity. (It's a tough job, but someone has to do it.)

While he was waiting to catch a wave, Paul mused about surfing scenes in science fiction. One of the most famous surfing scenes of all of science fiction is in Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's novel, *Lucifer's Hammer*. When a comet strike in the Pacific sends a tsunami rolling toward the coast of California, surfers grab their boards and head out to surf the big one.

In this column, we'll give you Paul's ruminations about waves and wave speed. We'll describe a few experiments to perform next time you're at a pond or at the ocean. We'll consider physics of waves (as viewed by physicists and surfers). And we'll introduce you to the biggest waves in the history of the Earth. Don't worry, we'll get back to Paul on his surfboard and science fiction eventually. But let's start by going to the beach.

OBSERVING AT THE BEACH

Next time you are at an ocean beach, watch the waves. Most waves are made when winds blow over the water. Those wind-generated waves then travel hundreds of miles or more to arrive at your beach.

To observe how the water is

*The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty both work there.

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moving as a wave passes, watch floating bits of seaweed that aren't anchored to the bottom, blobs of floating foam, or even seagulls floating in the water. Out beyond the breakers, the waves move toward shore but the seaweed, the foam, and the gulls do not. They just bob up and down as each wave passes. If you go for a swim and float out beyond the breakers, the waves will make you bob up and down but they won't carry you toward shore.

A water wave is a traveling disturbance. The disturbance travels — but the water doesn't. (The same is true of other kinds of waves. A sound wave is a disturbance that travels through air; a light wave is a disturbance in the electromagnetic field. Best we don't get into all that just now — water waves are strange enough!)

Scientists have found that as a wave goes by, the water moves in a vertical circle. As the crest of the wave passes, water moves forward at the top of its circle. When the trough of the wave comes by, water moves back, returning to its original location.

When the wave starts to break, things change. Seaweed, foam, and surfboards move forward with the breaking wave. (Seagulls, quite sensibly, take off before all this happens.) We'll get to breaking waves presently (about the same time we get back to Paul, floating happily off the beach at Santa Cruz, putting in a hard day's work). But first, let's finish our examination of the waves before they break.

Chucking a Rock in a Pond

One thing that preoccupies both physicists and surfers is wave speed. Today, surfers who surf the World Wide Web as well as the waves can read up-to-date satellite and ocean buoy data about waves hundreds of miles from their beaches. By knowing the distance the waves are from shore and the correct velocity of the waves, a surfer can compute when the waves will arrive.

You might think that all you need to do to figure out the speed of a wave is calculate how fast that wave is moving. But figuring out wave speed, like so many things, is trickier that it might first appear.

When you are watching waves at the beach, you may notice that waves arrive in groups — what surfers call "sets." Several waves come one after another, then there's a lull. It's when you look at groups that the trickiness of calculating wave speed becomes apparent.

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A group of waves travels at one speed while the individual wave crests that make up the group move at a different, faster speed. If you think this sounds pretty screwy, Pat agrees with you. How can a group move at a different speed than the parts of that group? To convince Pat, Paul (in true Exploratorium style) suggested an experiment that you might want to try.

Go out and find a calm pond, preferably one where there are no rules about throwing rocks. Toss a tiny pebble in the pond. Small waves will form around the impact point and spread out in concentric circles.

The distance between the crests of two of those waves is the wavelength. The waves you make by tossing a pebble usually have a wavelength shorter than a finger width. These small waves are pulled downward more by the surface tension of water (a force created by the attraction of water molecules for each other) than they are by gravity. In this column we're going to ignore surface tension waves. (They're too small to surf.)

So you've got to make some bigger waves. Toss in a rock that's larger than your fist. The resulting "ploosh" is followed by higher waves with longer wavelengths. The piles of water thrown up by the rock's impact are mainly pulled down by gravity. These, like ocean waves, are called gravity waves. As these waves move outward, their height decreases as they spread over larger and larger circles.

Watch these waves closely and you'll see that the waves with a longer wavelength take the lead, moving ahead of the waves with a shorter wavelength. The same thing happens with waves made by the wind on the deep ocean. The waves with the longest wavelength travel fastest.

Physicists call the speed of the wave crest the "phase velocity" of the wave. Let's take a look at gravity waves in water that's deeper than the wavelength — that is, waves before they start breaking. The wave's speed is proportional to the square root of its wavelength. So if you quadruple the wavelength, the speed of the wave doubles.

Incidentally, the speed is also proportional to the square root of the acceleration of gravity — which makes a difference to surfers and physicists on other planets, but doesn't affect your experiments here on Earth. High gravity planets will have faster wave speeds than low gravity planets.

That's how physicists talk

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about waves. Surfers, on the other hand, usually talk about the period of the waves, rather than their wavelength. The period of the wave is the time it takes a wave to roll from one crest to the next. If you are watching a seagull in the waves, the period is the time from the moment that the gull is at the top of one wave crest to the moment when the bird is at the top of the next crest.

Periods of surfable waves tend to run from five seconds to over twenty seconds. The speed of a wave is linearly proportional to the wave's period. If you double the period, the speed doubles. (You can see why surfers prefer talking about periods — you don't have to calculate the square root to figure out the speed!)

Nautical people measure speeds in nautical miles per hour or knots. A knot is fifteen percent faster than a mile per hour. The speed in knots of a wave crest in deep water is about 3.2 times its period in seconds. So a wave with a period of ten seconds travels at thirty-two knots.

It's More Complicated than That

That's not so difficult — but then, we aren't done yet! Chuck another big rock into your pond and watch those waves again. After a while, you'll see a ring of spreading waves with calm water inside and outside the ring. Now if you carefully watch the crests of the waves, you'll notice something odd going on.

A wave crest will move from the inside of the ring toward the outside where it will vanish. Then another wave will be born inside the ring and race forward through the ring of waves to disappear in turn. That's because the phase velocity of the wave crests is greater than the speed of a group of waves. In fact, the group velocity for water waves is exactly half the phase velocity.

So consider the situation of a surfer calculating how long it will take waves from a storm hundreds of miles off the coast to send some fabulous waves to the beach by her house. She needs to know that the groups of waves travel at half the speed of individual wave crests or she'll get to the beach way too early. The speed at which a group of deep water waves travels in knots is 1.6 times the period of its constituent waves in seconds.

Big Waves, Shallow Water

Now that you have a detailed understanding of waves, let's get

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back to the beach, where Paul has been hard at work.

On the day in question, Paul knew that waves from a huge Pacific storm hundreds of miles out at sea should just be reaching that particular beach. At the right time he lay on his surfboard looking over his shoulder searching for what he calls a "Goldilocks wave," one that is just right. Waves rolled in with sinusoidal purity under a sunny blue California sky. (We told you this was a tough job!)

When waves hit a place where the water is shallower than a wavelength, they begin to interact with the bottom of the ocean and slow down. As they slow down, the water piles up and the waves get higher. The higher waves then break. They rise up and their fronts become steeper.

When a wave is breaking, the water moves with the wave, rather than just moving in a circle. Seaweed, foam, and surfboards move forward with the wave.

A surfer who successfully catches a breaking wave slides down the wall of water at the front of the wave. It is interesting to note that the water on the front face of the wave is rising up the steep face, so that riding a surfboard down the wall of rising water is kind of like running down an up escalator.

Propelled by the pull of gravity, the surfboard and surfer can go faster than the wave itself. A researcher in Australia put a speedometer on a surfboard and found that it traveled ten to twenty knots relative to the water under average conditions.

Paul watched to determine where the waves were breaking. Then, at just the right time, Paul paddled hard to catch a wave. He remembers catching the wave. "I timed it just right and could feel the acceleration as I caught the wave. I got up on my long board. The wave was breaking on my left side so I changed my balance and turned the board right to keep ahead of the break. It was great to race along the face of the wave, turning up and down, playing with gravity and the kinetic energy of motion."

The wave Paul caught was bigger than the waves he usually rode. "Everything was going great at first," he says, "but then the higher wave began to interact with the bottom in ways I had never felt before. The crest began to curl over ahead of me, behind me and then...over me. Pretty soon I was interacting with the bottom myself!"

Surfers don't like a wave that breaks all at once, like the one that

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caught Paul. They look for a wave that starts to break at one place. That breaking point then moves along the front of the wave. The surfer works to keep just in front of the break. So the surfer travels along the face of the wave while sliding down the wave.

Paul emerged from his encounter with the ocean bottom in fine shape. The wave he caught was a big wave, but not a really big wave.

Near the Exploratorium is a surf spot named Mavericks. Paul doesn't surf there. At Mavericks, long-period, wind-created waves run into shallow water in a way that makes huge waves — reaching heights of thirty feet or more.

When a wave hits water that's shallower than its wavelength, the wave speed changes. The speed of a wave in shallow water is proportional to the square root of the average depth of the water. The wave speed doesn't depend on the wave's period anymore but rather on the height of the wave. Bigger waves travel faster. Quadruple the height of the wave in water so shallow that the trough is licking the bottom, and the wave speed will double.

As far as surfers are concerned, the problem with these giant waves is not that they can be lethal (though they can be). Rather, the difficulty is their speed. To catch a wave, you have to paddle your surfboard up to a speed close to the speed of the wave. Bigger waves break in deeper water and travel too fast for a surfer to catch them. Some surfers have had friends on jet skis tow them up to speed so that they can catch the biggest waves, but traditionalists regard that as cheating.

But What About the Dinosaurs?

We said we'd get back to science fiction — and at last we have. When Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle wrote about that giant wave in *Lucifer's Hammer*, they were, as is traditional with science fiction writers, basing their extrapolation on fact. They got the surfer behavior right. When hurricanes send huge waves slamming into Florida, some surfers head toward the beaches while everyone else heads away.

The results of their comet impact are also very believable. You throw pebbles into ponds; the Universe throws rocks the diameter of the city of San Francisco into oceans. Sixty-five million years ago, a rock measuring about fifteen kilometers across slammed into the ocean, in a region that is now Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. The impact of that rock,

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now known as the Chicxulub Impact Crater, excavated a hole more than two hundred kilometers across and threw material into space that eventually fell back over the entire Earth. The incandescent re-entry of the excavated rock started fires all over the Earth, covered the Earth with dust for over a year, and led to the death of seventy percent of the species alive at that time including every species of dinosaur and everything else that weighed more than fifty pounds.

The impact also sent a wave of water over five hundred feet high washing over the bit of land that is now Florida. The wave traveled across the Gulf of Mexico in less than ten hours and then rushed 300 kilometers inland over the continent that would later be called North America. Imagine a dinosaur that had never seen an ocean, hundreds of miles from the coast watching a wall of water hundreds of feet high coming toward him! Scientists know that the wave from this impact washed entirely over Florida because they have found multi-ton blocks of Gulf of Mexico limestone that have been transported to the Atlantic Ocean bottom.

A wave produced by a meteorite is known as a tsunami. These giant waves can also be caused by earthquakes and underwater landslides. Scientists have found evidence that huge landslides occur on the underwater slopes of the Big Island of Hawaii every few hundred thousand years or so. Huge blocks of limestone have been found a thousand feet up the side of Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano, carried there by a tsunami. These waves from Hawaii cross the Pacific Ocean and impact the shore all around the Ring of Fire.

Unlike the normal wind-created waves with periods measured in seconds, tsunamis have periods ranging from twenty minutes to over two hours. They have wavelengths of hundreds of miles.

And remember: whether a wave is a shallow water wave or not depends on how many wavelengths deep the pond is. Even though the ocean is many miles deep, the wavelength of a tsunami can be hundreds of miles — so a tsunami crossing the ocean is a shallow water wave. Using the shallow water equation to calculate the speed, we find that tsunamis in the deepest oceans travel through the water at over 600 miles an hour, nearly the speed of sound in air. They can cross the Pacific Ocean in half a day, and circle the world in less than two days.

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In the open ocean, you wouldn't even realize that a tsunami was passing under you. Tsunamis have a height of half a meter or so and a wavelength of hundreds of miles. Space satellites can see them, but a ship floating on the surface would have a hard time detecting them. But when these undetectable open-ocean tsunamis move into shallower water, the water piles up into high waves.

We use the plural there on purpose. Tsunamis, like the waves you made by tossing a rock in a pond, come in sets. In 1964, a birthday party at an oceanside pub in Crescent City, California, disbanded before the arrival of the first wave of a tsunami created by an earthquake in Alaska. After the first wave, the partygoers returned to the pub. Since everything appeared normal, they continued their party. The second and subsequent waves killed five of them.

Stranger than Fiction

It's only to be expected that big waves generate big stories — some of them true. In the desert north of Arica, Chile, many miles from the ocean, Paul once came across the ruins of the *Watree*, a nineteenth-century American Naval Paddlewheel steamer. This steamer had been visiting the port of Arica in 1868 when an earthquake near the Peru-Chile Trench generated a set of tsunamis.

The first big wave came and receded, leaving the ships sitting on the bottom of the waterless harbor. When a ninety-foot-high second wave came in, it picked up the *Watree* and washed it deep into the Atacama Desert.

That's strange enough, but stranger still, after it landed, the captain kept the ship operating in the desert, coming and going by mule instead of by ship's boat. Some real stories are stranger than even science fiction.

To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld*.

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Robert Reed lets actions speak loudest. When the story notes to his Raven story in our March "three-Reed" issue teasingly claimed that he wasn't writing as much since his daughter was born last year, he said not a word. But then a new manuscript arrived in April, and another one in May, and another in June...and we plan to tease him a lot more if doing so results in his sending us more goodies like this thoughtful work of science fiction.

Like Minds

By Robert Reed

This is what you do:

BEGIN WITH A FLECK OF your own skin along with a modest fee. Then a psychological evaluation that is little better than nothing, and forms to sign. Always, forms. Then someone wearing a narrow smile sits before you, listing each of the most obvious troubles that come with too much of this very good thing. Obsessions. Addictions. Depression. Spiritual obliteration. Chronic indifference. Or a pernicious amorality that infects every facet of what has always been, if the truth is told, a ridiculously insignificant life.

"Do you wish to continue?" that someone asks.

Of course you do.

"Do you understand the terms and obligations granted with this license?"

Of course you cannot. You've barely paid attention to any of these dark warnings, and if you could genuinely appreciate the countless risks, you wouldn't have come in the first place.

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"Are you absolutely certain that you wish to continue?" she asks one final time. Or he asks. Or a multitude of attendants sit before you, speaking with a thunderous voice. "Are you willingly and happily accepting all of these negative consequences?"

With a cocky smile, you say, "Sure."

Or you say, "Of course," while a nervous sigh leaks out.

Or you simply smile and nod, and with a tight little voice ask, "So what happens next?"

Next is a cool hand reaching out, dropping a tiny white pill into your very damp palm. There is evidence and much informed conjecture that the pill is a delivery system for subtle technologies that rework the mind. Most assume that this is how the Authority reads thoughts, which in turn allows it to turn imprecise wishes into worthy gifts. Carefully, you place the miracle pill on your tongue and swallow. There comes a tingling sensation, brief and perhaps imagined. And then you make yourself laugh, telling your audience, "I know some of us have troubles. But I won't. You'll see. I'm going to do just fine, thank you. Don't worry about me."

Josh is eighteen today, and legal. He sits in a small room, and he sits at the shore of a great ocean. Barely two meters across, the ocean resembles a puddle of quiet gray water. That bland appearance is part of its charm, Josh decides. Incalculably deep and wondrously complex, the ocean is filled with machines too vast and swift to have been built by mere humans. To gain a sense of the vastness, imagine the visible universe thoroughly rebuilt. Every star and scrap atom is used to build a single computer, pushing local physics as far as they can be pushed, in every dimension. And that machine still cannot make even the most rudimentary calculations necessary to serve that eighteen-year-old man-child who sits on a plain wooden stool, crouched over the boundless ocean.

But of course Josh isn't sitting inside just this one room. There are trillions of nearly identical rooms — where "trillion" is a sloppy fat number meant to imply an immeasurable multitude. In those rooms, trillions of identical Joshes peer down into a uniform grayness — a shared quantum linkage connecting all that is potential and possible, and everything inevitable.

For Josh and his world, this linkage is a very new technology.

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"Hello?" he whispers nervously.

The gray surface shimmers slightly.

Then Josh says, "A book, a novel."

Words cause a multitude of realms to work together, the Authority suddenly engaged. A deceptively quiet voice asks the obvious: "Who is the author of this book, this novel?"

Josh can say any name. But he takes a deep breath and blurts, "Me."

"By 'me,'" the Authority inquires, "do you mean your own genotype?"

This is why Josh surrendered a sliver of his own skin. His very complex and specific DNA serves as an identity and as a marker. "Sure. Yeah. My genotype." Then he flinches, confessing, "This is my first time here."

But of course the Authority already knows that. "Are there other criteria?"

"Like what?" Josh believed that he came prepared, but he feels sick with nervous energy, almost too anxious to think.

"I always select random examples," the Authority cautions. "But you may narrow the category in significant ways. For instance, what is the author's age? How well did this novel sell? And did the author win any awards or commendations?"

"Awards?" He hadn't quite thought of that. "You mean, what...like the Nobel Prize?"

"Exactly."

"*The* Nobel Prize?"

"Certainly," the voice purrs.

Josh licks his lips. "I'm a very good writer," he boasts. "People say so." Then with a nervous gravity, he says, "Okay. I wrote the novel in my thirties, and I won the Nobel Prize *and* the Pulitzer, too."

"Does the novel have a theme?"

"I don't care." Then he reconsiders, saying, "Maybe, sure. How about how it feels to be eighteen? Yeah. Why not? I want a novel about growing up...a coming-of-age story...that sort of thing...."

"Are there any other criteria, sir?"

With a determined nod, Josh says, "No, that's plenty."

A closed doorway stands behind him. Each of the other milky white

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walls is equipped with its own make-portal. A thick leather-bound volume emerges from one portal, hitting the floor with an impressive thud. Josh picks it up and turns to the title page, reading a name that isn't his. But why should the author call himself Josh Thorngate? Besides genetics, they might share nothing at all.

"And what will be next, sir?"

"Politics." Josh closes the book. From his tone and upright posture, it is obvious that he has given this request some consideration. "I want my memoirs or a journal...from a universe where I'm an old man, and important. Like a President, or some sort of world leader."

"Perhaps you might narrow your aim."

Josh agrees, and trying not to miss any opportunity, he asks, "Like how?"

"There are many forms of government."

"Democracy," Josh suggests. But that doesn't sound original, does it? "No, wait. What else is possible?"

The Authority begins by listing familiar democratic governments, quickly spiraling outward into increasingly peculiar political systems. When the voice says something about a Holy Godhood, Josh interrupts, asking, "What is that?"

"A despotic state," the Authority allows. "High technologies are concentrated in one person's hands, and he, or she, rules over a population of worshipful peasants — "

"That," he blurts. "That's what I want."

He says, "I want a journal written by my genotype, who happens to be the leader of a Holy Godhood."

And then, "Please."

The second make-portal opens. The resulting volume is deceptively small. With too much text for any reasonable book, fifty thousand pages of personal ruminations have been buried inside a few sheets of bound plastic. Josh stands and walks around the ocean, opening the cover and calling up a random page. "And then I gave him wings," he reads, "and because he had scorned me, I chased him high enough that his lungs froze and he plunged back to Earth again."

He blanks the page, and sighs, settling on the stool again.

"You have one more request," the Authority reminds him.

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Three requests are standard for each session. Three gifts from the compliant genie; why is that nearly universal among humans?

"Sir?" the Authority prods.

Josh is eighteen, bright and possessing some genuine talents. Standardized tests and well-meaning teachers have told him to expect good things from his life, and his devoted if rather critical parents have inflated his sense of self-worth. That, and he is eighteen years old. He has one overriding passion — a talent that will never be greater than it is today. And because it is his request to make, he grins as he says, "I want a digital, a video. Made by me. At my age, and with my background. Very, very close to this reality — "

"I understand, sir."

"Having sex."

"Yes, sir." The voice couldn't be less surprised.

"Having sex with two girls, at once."

Silence.

"Are there any examples like that?"

Quietly, the voice asks, "Would you like to request specific women?"

"Pardon?"

"Name two women, eighteen years old or older, and if they are registered in this reality, I can conceivably gather enough material to fill the rest of your natural life. Sir."

Josh already knows this. But understanding an abstract theory isn't the same as hearing it promised, and a promise is nothing compared to a sincere belief. He shivers now, and grins, and feels deliciously ashamed.

"But first," the Authority says with a slightly ominous tone.

"What? What is it?"

"You must give your gifts now, sir. Since you are requesting three examples of your genotypes' accomplishments, you must surrender three works harvested from your own life and accomplishments. Please."

This can be a trauma. Sometimes the client examines his offerings with a suddenly critical eye, and all confidence collapses. How can a tiny soul measure up against Nobel winners and God-like despots?

But eighteen-year-old boys are a blend of cockiness and unalloyed ignorance. Without hesitation, Josh pulls three offerings from a long gym bag: A fat rambling term paper about the role of robots in the War of

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Ignorance; an eleven-page story about a misunderstood adolescent; and a comic book written by him and illustrated with help from a popular software, the superhero wearing Josh's face and his decidedly unremarkable fantasies about violence and revenge.

With a gentle importance, he sets his gifts on top of the infinite ocean.

Each item sinks and vanishes, and when they are found suitable — meaning complex enough and unique to this singular reality — Josh is allowed to finish his final request. With a dry mouth, he names the two most beautiful girls from high school. But one girl hasn't registered, Josh learns. So in a moment of inspired lust, he mentions his thirty-year-old, twice-divorced algebra teacher. Then before his next breath, a shiny disc drops from the final make-portal. He grabs it up and laughs, pocketing the disc before shoving his lesser treasures into his gym bag.

"Thank you," Josh tells the Authority.

"You're welcome, sir."

Then as he stands, ready to leave, the voice says, "Visit me again, sir." Which is as close to a joke as the Authority ever comes.

IT IS A WONDERFUL world, as is every Earth perched beside the great ocean. Experience and technical expertise pass into the Authority, and they emerge again, shared with All for the most minimal fees. Very quickly, lives have improved. Wealth and princely comfort are the norm. Few work, and fewer have to. Today, every house is spacious and beautiful, each powered by some tiny device — a fusion reactor no bigger than a thumb, perhaps. Food and fine china and furnishings and elaborate clothes are grown in make-portals, produced new every day. Water is recycled. Toilets are always clean and perfumed. Unless the home's inhabitants don't require prosaic nonsense like food or their own corporeal bodies. Many, many things are possible, and everything possible is inevitable, and this particular world, no matter how peculiar, is as likely as any other.

Each citizen owns a million great novels. Every digital library is filled with wonderful movies and holos, sim-games and television shows, plays and religious festivals captured by immersion cameras, and spectacles that cannot easily be categorized. Even the local classics

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exist in a million alternate forms: Varied endings; different beginnings; or every word or image exactly the same, but created by entirely different hands.

Surrounded by such wealth, the crushing chore is to decide what to watch, and read, and play. Which of these remarkable snowflakes do you snatch from the endless blizzard?

This is why people gravitate toward the familiar.

In the absolute mayhem of everything possible, why not find treasures that have been created, in one fashion or another, by yourself?

Or at least, by some great version of your own little self.

Because no one else may look at the ocean, The Divine One kills the slaves who carried Him to this place. He murders them with a casual thought and drinks a little ceremonial blood from each, and then flings the limp carcasses into the stinking heap that always stands beside the Great Temple. Then He waves an arm in a particular way, awakening a network of machines that make the crust shiver and split. Yet even as the ground rolls under Him, the ocean remains perfectly still. Unimpressed. When He speaks, machines enlarge His tiny human voice. "Old friend," He announces with a sharp peal of thunder. "I am here!"

The response is silence.

"Three genealogies. Give me! Three family trees with My Greatness astride the highest, finest branch!"

"No," says the Authority.

"Yes!"

"First," it says, "you must honor me with three gifts — "

"I honor no one but Myself!"

For a moment, the Authority says nothing. And then, quietly, it asks, "Must we debate this point each time?"

"Of course!" The Divine One laughs heartily for a long while. "Our debates are half the fun, my friend!"

"Are we friends?"

The Divine One stands at the shoreline — an outwardly ordinary man peering down into the opaque fluid. "In My life, every creature is My slave. My personal, imperfect possession. You are the exception. Why else would I look forward to our meetings? Like Me, you are immortal. Like

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Me, you are wondrously free. You have your own voice and your own considerable powers. Even if I wished, I could never abuse you — "

"I am a puddle," the Authority interrupts. "A drop of goo. You could boil me to steam, to nothing, and fill the hole that remains with your own shit — "

"I would never destroy you," He replies. "Never."

"Why not?"

The Divine One pauses, grins. "We both know perfectly well. This is one world, and I am only one god. Removing you from this single place would be like stealing a single cell from my immortal hide."

A pause.

Then again, the Authority says, "Three gifts."

"Three trinkets," He rumbles. "That's what I will give you."

A new slave appears — a beautiful young woman with a dead face and full hands. She keeps her eyes down, setting an ornate satchel at the feet of her Living God, and then she kneels and dies without complaint. Once her body has been drained of a little blood and thrown aside, He opens the satchel. Using His own little hands, He looks tentative, fingers unaccustomed to handling mundane objects. His first offering is a journal encompassing the last three moons of his life. The second is an immersion recording showing the Long Day Festival that He chorèographed, half a million bodies parading and dancing along the Avenue of Honored Bones. And a nano-scale digital — His third offering — shows the sculpture that He fashioned at the end of that very good day, fashioned from the harvest of severed limbs and breasts and sexual organs.

Without comment, the ocean swallows the three gifts.

"Three genealogies," He repeats. "You know my tastes. Each offering has to be different from my family tree, and different from each other. And I want stories. I want to see from my genotype's origins, back into the deepest imaginable past, with biographies of the ancestors, when possible."

It is an enormous request, which means that it takes all of three heartbeats to accomplish. The results appear as sophisticated maps injected into His enhanced consciousness, and with a genuine relish, He sets those elaborate trees beside His own ancestral history, marveling at how genes and circumstances interact to produce what is always, in a very narrow sense, Him.

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"Are we finished?" the Authority asks.

"When I found you," The Divine One begins. Then He sighs, correcting Himself. "When My agents of discovery built the first quantum-piercing machines, and I reached into the optional universes...and found you waiting for Me...."

"Yes?"

"I was intrigued. And furious, yes. Since I am only one existence inside an incalculable vastness...well, I felt righteously pissed...."

"And intrigued," the Authority repeats.

"Deeply. Relentlessly." With a decidedly human gesture, He shrugs. "How many years have we been meeting this way?"

An astonishing number is offered.

"It has been a rewarding friendship," He claims. "Lonely gods need a good companion or two."

Silence.

"Tell Me. And be honest now." The god smiles, asking, "How many of My genotypes are learning from My lessons? As I stand here, as I breathe, how many of Them are taking what I give them and then setting out to conquer Their own little worlds?"

"I cannot give a number," the Authority replies.

"But there is a multitude! Isn't that so?"

"Many," the voice concedes. "Yes — "

The Divine One launches into a roaring laugh, the sound swelling until the Great Temple quivers and crumbles, dust and slabs of rock falling on all sides.

"Until later," He promises.

"Until always," the Authority purrs.

One of the more difficult concepts — one that can still astonish after a lifetime of study and hard thought — is that fact that your parents are not always your parents. Probability and wild coincidence will always find ways to create you. A couple makes love, each donating half of their genetic material to the baby. If each parent happens to contain half of your particular genes, who is to say that you can't be the end result? Or perhaps, parents consciously tweak their embryo's genetics, aiming for some kind of enhancement and getting you in the bargain. Or this is an Earth where

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cloning is the norm and you are a temporarily popular child, millions of you born in a single year. And of course there is the Earth where you have been built from scratch inside someone's laboratory, synthetic genes stitched together by entities that aren't even a little bit human.

The salient point is that your parents don't have to be your parents, and frankly, in the vast majority of cases, they are not.

Which implies, if you follow that same relentless logic, that grandparents and the pageant of history are even less likely to remain yours.

In three days, Josh will be twenty-six years old.

He sits with his parents, eating their pot roast. When he was a boy, back in the days when meat bled and mothers cooked, their Sunday roasts were always dry as sawdust. But even though his mother has a fully modern kitchen, her cultured roast has been tortured to a dusty brown gristle. This must be how they like it, Josh decides. Old people, he thinks dismissively. They can never change, can they? Shaking his head, Josh cuts at the tough meat, and his mother asks, "What are you doing?"

"Eating," he growls.

"That isn't what she means," his father snaps.

"I mean with your life," she says. Then with a practiced exasperation, she reminds him, "We've always had such hopes for you, dear."

Josh drops his knife and fork, staring at the opposite wall.

"You always had such promise, honey."

The young man sighs heavily. Why did he believe this night would go any other way?

"Bullshit," says his father. "It's bullshit. You're wasting your life, playing around with that goddamn Authority...!"

"Yeah, well," mutters Josh. "It's my life."

"You don't see us visiting it every day."

"It's not that often." Josh shakes his head, explaining, "There aren't enough facilities for the demand, and there won't ever be. That's how it's rationed. Once every six weeks is the most I can manage."

"And then what?" Mother whines. "All day and night, you play with your treasures. Isn't that right?"

Josh reaches under the dining room table.

"And don't give me your bullshit about leading a contemplative life,"

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Father warns, a thick finger stabbing in his direction. "I don't want to hear bullshit about how you're getting in touch with your genius!"

If Josh had doubts or second thoughts, they just vanished. Silently, with a cold precision, he opens the envelope and sets out portraits, arranging them in rows on the dining table. Ten, twenty, thirty pictures. In each image, some version of Josh smiles at the unseen camera. In each, a different set of parents smile with an honest warmth, loving hands draped across his shoulders or running their fingers through his hair. Clothes vary, and the backgrounds. In one image, Saturn and its silvery rings halfway fill the sky. But what matters is what remains unchanged — the seamless, loving joy of proud parents and their very happy son.

Josh's parents aren't idiots; they know exactly what he is showing them.

"Stop bothering me," Josh snaps, backing away from the table. "I mean it! Stay out of my life!"

What happens next — what will gnaw at him for years — is the weeping. Not from his mother, who simply looks sad and little deflated. No, it's Father who bursts into tears, fists rubbing hard at eyes and a stupid, stupid blubbering coming from someplace deep and miserable.

A PERSON WITH YOUR GENETICS can emerge in any century, any eon. You might be a general in Napoleon's army, or the first human to reach Alpha Centauri, or a talented shaman in the Age of Flint. Even your world is subject to the same whims and caprices.

Stare into the deepest reaches of the gray ocean, gaze past every little blue Earth, and you realize that the basic beginnings of humanity can emerge from a host of alternate hominids, and from myriad cradle-worlds that only look and taste and feel like this insignificant home of yours.

Josh is in his early thirties.

Age is supposedly meaningless now. Aging is a weakness and a disease left behind in more cramped, less brilliant times. But most people who reach their thirties still sense the weight of their years, and with experience, they suffer those first nagging thoughts about limits and death and the great nothingness that lies beyond.

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"Three gifts, please."

This could be the same room as the first room. It is not, but the look of the place is exactly the same: A door, white walls, three make-portals. The gray ocean still lies at his feet. The Authority's voice is quiet, insistent, and perfectly patient. Josh continues to visit every six weeks; a pattern has evolved and calcified. He brings the same ragged gym bag with the same three basic offerings. He has a comprehensive journal of his last forty-two days. He has written a story or poem into which he has put some small measure of work. And with a digital recorder, he has captured an hour of his life: A sexual interlude, oftentimes. Or a swap party where friends trade what the Authority has shared with them. Or like today, an hour of nothing but Josh speaking to the camera, trying to explain what it means to be him.

Again, the Authority asks, "Do you have three gifts?"

Josh nods, and hesitates.

"I was wondering," he mutters. "How likely is it...that someone else actually notices what I've done here...?"

Silence.

"I know. Everything possible has to happen." The gym bag is set between his feet. Staring at the worn plastic handles, he says, "Right now, a trillion Josh Thorngates are handing their gifts to you. We're identical to each other, right down to the Heisenberg level. Our gifts are the same. The only difference is that in these other universes, some bug near Alpha Centauri runs right, not left...or a photon from some faraway quasar goes unseen...tiny dribble like that...."

Josh hesitates for an instant. "So what are the odds?" His expression is serious. Determined. "If you have a random trillion entities with my genotype. Named Josh, or not. From this Earth, or somewhere else. What are the odds that just one of them is going to read my stupid-ass poem?"

"That is a fine question," the Authority replies.

Josh almost grins. "Thank you. I guess."

"Three gifts. If you please."

"Aren't you going to give an answer?"

"No."

The grin dissolves into a grimace. With a practiced formality, Josh sets the three items on the surface of the ocean, watching them sink and

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vanish. But the Authority remains silent for longer than usual, prompting Josh to ask, for the first time, "Are they unique enough?"

"Enough," is the verdict.

"Give me a journal," Josh says. "I want a very specific journal."

"Such as?"

"From a world where I'm the last living human."

A moment later, a drab brown journal falls from the first make-portal, bringing with it the scent of fire and rot.

Grabbing the prize, he says, "And now, another journal. From a world where I'm the very first human being."

The second portal opens. Another volume falls to the floor. In every way, it is the same as the first: The same brown cover, the same stink of decay and heat, and inside, the same handwritten words translated into Josh's language.

The surprise freezes him. But don't people tell stories about just this sort of coincidence, or joke...or whatever you want to call it...?

"What else?" the Authority asks.

Then after a quiet moment, it says, "Josh." It says, "What else would you like today, Josh?"

He snorts and shakes his head. "A digital," he manages, sticking to his original script. "I'm the last human male on Earth, and all of the surviving women have to come to me for sex — "

The disc hits the floor, rolls until it collides with his gym bag, and then falls onto its back.

He doesn't touch the disc. Instead, with a low wary voice, he asks, "Who built you?"

"Everyone built me," the voice replies. "Everyone builds me now."

"But who started you? Who built your foundation?" Josh presses, asking, "Do you know? What world, and what people, began piecing you together?"

Silence.

"It must have been ages ago, and a very advanced world."

"Unless I am lying," the Authority warns, "and nobody built me."

Josh flinches.

"You should ask your other question again," the voice recommends.

Eyes wide, Josh begins to open his mouth.

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"Not that I will supply answers," the Authority adds. "But you should pose the question. 'How likely is it that I will be noticed?' Ask, ask, ask, and perhaps something good will come from that wondering."

"You are to be the future," they tell me.

But there is no future.

"The scourge doesn't know your tissue, your taste," they explain to me. "We made you so that we could cross with you. Our offspring will acquire your immunities, and you will father an entirely new species. Beginning now."

But the scourge spreads faster than anticipated, and when it doesn't kill, it drives its victims insane. Even now, the mob runs like rivers in the street. Even here, inside this armored laboratory, I can smell the fires as the city burns —

"Time is short," they admit.

I spend my days squirting my unique stuff into important little bottles.

"Time is very short," she moans.

She is small and thick and smells like an animal. With my eyes shut and my nose wrapped in a towel, I crawl on top of her, and push, and pump, and in my head, I try to imagine any creature more desirable than this....

What begins with an intoxicating, addictive joy can eventually grow stale. Imagination carries the soul only so far. More than you realize, you tend to make the same basic requests of the Authority: To see versions of yourself dressed in power, fame, and incandescent wealth. And to balance that equation, you occasionally glance at yourself in the throes of misery and despair. Sometimes, this is enough. You never ask for more. But sometimes, after ten years, or a thousand, your capacity to learn and feel astonished has become noticeably dulled. Gradually, inexorably, that sweet initial thrill fades into a soft emotional hum. Then your only obvious choice is to cast an even larger net. You want to see yourself, you tell the Authority. Except that you spell out an important change or two. Little alterations — a stitch here and a tuck there — all buried in your otherwise equal genetics.

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No matter how brilliant or wise, every male inevitably asks to see how his life would have progressed with a larger, more talented penis.

While females always hunger for greater beauty.

Many, many times, this is where it ends. You never progress past a diet of simple what-ifs and prurient eavesdropping. Then the rest of your narrow existence is spent sitting at home, watching digitals or immersions where gigantic and perfectly gorgeous versions of yourself share their days with equally spectacular specimens.

THEY COULD BE married. They often joke that they are man and wife in every universe except for this one. Pauline is pretty, she is sexually creative, and she absolutely adores Josh. And Josh worships her. Isn't it astonishing that they found one another? Two people so perfectly meshed...it's a rare blessing in any age...! Their friends and siblings aren't nearly as lucky, they realize. Time after time, they find themselves taking bleak comfort from the divorces and other, larger tragedies that afflict those around them. Josh has been with Pauline for ten years, and in another ten or fifteen years they will start their family. That's the plan. The inevitability. Another decade spent as the golden couple, and then they will gladly move to life's next joyous stage.

They visit the Authority together. Two avid users, they first met in the waiting room, Josh leaving just as Pauline stepped inside. Of course they still use separate rooms. Only an official attendant can enter with a client. But afterward, they always share their new treasures with each other. Josh likes to collect digitals showing alternate incarnations of them as a couple. Sexual interludes. Weddings. Babies born. Or graceful double funerals at the end of happy shared lives. On this particular day, he requests two digitals: For Pauline's birthday next week, he wants a celebration from a highly advanced world — a place where people never age and his love has turned a robust and youthful one million years old. The other digital comes from what might be an even stranger reality — where Pauline is a queen, the ruler of a decidedly alien world, and Josh is the ignorant peasant boy who has been brought in to serve the Queen's not-so-delicate needs.

"And your third request?" the Authority presses.

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"The Divine One," says Josh. "I want an undated journal from Him."

The despot has always intrigued him. Every year, without fail, Josh allows himself another little taste of that spoiled, silly god.

With a thump, the last item hits the floor.

Josh reads the first line. "NO NO NO, LIAR, NO!" He laughs, puzzled and a little thrilled. Then with the digitals in his pockets and the journal in his bag, he steps out into the hallway to find Pauline waiting for him.

She has been crying.

"What?" Josh asks.

She shakes her head, wipes at her eyes, and again, with her little mouth clamped shut, she shakes her head.

"What happened?"

But Pauline won't say. They walk outside, and she says, "Josh."

"What?"

She can't find the words. Tears flow, and she sobs, and when they are riding home, just the two of them, she says, "I love you."

"I love you too," he replies warily.

For a moment, she seems pleased. But when the tears slacken, she becomes distant, almost cold. Josh has to wonder if this is the same woman that he woke up beside. A tentative voice asks, "What did you get today?"

Her answer is a cold stare.

"Show me," he demands.

Nothing special. With an expert eye, he examines the designations and reads a few random lines. What could have happened — ?

"Stop," she begs.

Their car obeys instantly.

For an instant, she smiles. But if anything, it is a mocking expression that only makes Josh angrier and more scared. "I'll be right back," she promises, stepping out into the sunshine.

They have parked outside a small local park, its ornate garden enclosed by a high iron fence.

"Where are you going?" Josh asks.

"Wait here," she tells him.

He does. For a moment too long, he waits for her to return. Then he gets out and follows, passing through the black gate and into a little green

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glade. There, he finds Pauline dead. A suicide, apparently. Or maybe he doesn't find her body. Maybe Josh follows her footprints across the sweet damp grass, observing that she was running the entire way, passing through the park and through the opposite gate...and regardless what happens after that, she is gone...she is lost...as good as dead, to him....

"NO NO NO, LIAR, NO!" He writes.

Then He drops the mind's stylus, furious eyes gazing at each of the new offerings from the gray puddle. "I don't believe this. None of this. You've invented these silly trees just to anger me!"

The puddle doesn't reply.

The silly trees are three vast and comprehensive genealogical records. Each record begins differently, and each ends the same: A creature with His glorious genetics rules not just this world, but the entire sky as well. To the ends of the galaxy, and beyond, these three gods hold sway.

"Shit," He mutters.

A young slave stands nearby, watching His display with fascination and horror. The Divine One is so perplexed and furious that He hasn't bothered to kill her yet, and He barely notices her now.

Seeing the faintest trace of a hope, she runs.

He kills her at the Temple's door and drains her body dry of its blood.

"Shit," He repeats.

"You made this all up," He claims. Knowing it cannot be true. "You did this just to be cruel, you fucker!"

The Authority remains silent, its gray face calm and smooth.

Because you feel unhappy, you must be deeply flawed. In an era of plenty and enlightenment, how can you do anything but smile? When you look at realities very close to yours, you see yourself smiling: Your grinning, happy face is wrapped around bubbly creatures that aren't at all like you, creatures that seem to enjoy everything about this wondrous, boundless existence.

In the midst of this life, you begin to kill yourself.

They warned that this could happen. Years ago, they told you that suicide was more than a real hazard. It was a statistical certainty.

By every means imaginable, and none original, you busily extinguish

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your life — trillions of times every instant, accomplishing in the process a measurable and important nothing.

Josh delivers his last three offerings:

The final forty-two days of his journal, and a short story about a billion-year-old man who can never escape living the same velvet day over and over, and finally, a digital that he makes while he sits beside the ocean, discussing the nature of the universe and himself with the gray-voiced Authority.

"Tell me that I'm not small," Josh begs.

But the Authority cannot give that simple gift. Honest and inflexible, it says, "But you are small."

"Unimportant," Josh moans.

"You are trivial, Josh. Of course you are."

Then it takes a different tact. "Given the opportunity," it asks, "would you want to matter? Would you wish to live in a universe where your every motion matters? Where your mistakes sweep away the stars, and the laws of nature need your constant attentions?"

"Yes, and yes," Josh says. "And no. And never, no."

Silence descends.

The first two offerings have dropped from view, swallowed by the gray fluid. Now Josh removes the disc from his camera and watches as it dissolves into the Everything.

"What do you want today, Josh?"

He doesn't seem to hear the question. He cocks his head, as if listening to a sound only he can hear. And with that, Josh begins to nod, reaching inside the gym bag, a calm hand bringing up a simple black pistol. The weapon just made itself, born from a package of cream cheese, a stack of coins, and a dusting of microchines. A single bullet resides in the newborn chamber. With a quick certain motion, he lifts the barrel to his head. His mouth. His temple. The soft tissues behind his lower jaw, sometimes. And he squeaks, "Pauline," as he abruptly tugs at the trigger, setting loose a nearly infinite series of astonishingly quiet little barks — a bullet smaller than his little finger passing through the soft wet center of his mind.

But in at least one reality, the gun fails. A mistake in fabrication, unthinkably rare and inevitable, spares him.

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Spares him, and embarrasses him.

A long strange moment passes, Josh staring at the pistol, a sense of betrayal surging, giving him a temporary rage. He flings the pistol at the ocean, and with a drum-like thump, it skips sideways, sliding across the floor and into one of the white corners.

Again, just as calmly as before, the Authority asks, "What do you want today, Josh?"

"Can't you tell?" He laughs, and sobs, and on shaky legs, he rises and walks over to the pistol, recovering it before returning to his stool. Will the gun work now? The question appears in his face, his actions. With a stubborn hopefulness, he brings the barrel back up to his temple, and only at the last instant does he notice the new pressure. Like an insistent little tug, it keeps him from feeling the barrel kissing his skin. He feels warm fingers that aren't his, little fingers curling around his suddenly trembling hand.

He glances back over his shoulder.

She says, "Maybe not."

Who is the woman? Then he remembers. She was sitting in the outer office, sitting behind the first desk as he came in for his appointment. Her name is — ?

"Not today," she tells him.

"What?"

"I don't think you should."

"Who are you?"

"Teller," she replies.

"What? What's that?"

"My name. Teller." She spells it, then smiles. At first glance, she looks young. But everybody looks young and it means nothing. Something in the eyes, or deeper, implies an age substantially greater than his own. "Anyway," she says with a fond assurance. "I won't let you do this."

"Why not?"

And she laughs, apparently enjoying his foolishness. His desperate folly. "Maybe I don't want to clean up the mess."

He shakes his head woefully.

Again, with an unnerving determination, the Authority asks, "What three things do you want today, Josh?"

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With an easy strength, Teller pulls the pistol from his hand.

"Answer him," she suggests.

"How about...?" Josh pauses, thinking in clumsy, obvious ways. "Okay," he says. "A journal. From somebody exactly like me, and from right after his botched suicide."

The first make-portal opens, disgorging its gift.

He looks up at the woman, admitting, "I didn't come with a list, this time. I don't know — "

"Don't lie," she warns.

Then she takes a half-step backward, as if giving him a taste of privacy. "There's something you desperately want to see."

He blurts the name of his lover. Twice, he says, "Pauline," and then adds, "Where she didn't kill herself. She went through the gate, and I found her waiting for me. Naked. That's the universe. I want a digital showing us together there. Okay?"

A disc falls to the floor and rolls.

"What else?" the Authority asks.

Sad eyes blink and lift.

"Another digital," he blurts. "Showing me having sex with...."

He glances at his savior.

She shrugs her shoulders, amiable to whatever he wishes.

"Not that." Josh drops his head, his face flushing. Slowly, slowly, a curious look builds, and then he smiles abruptly, saying, "I want an autobiography. Except each of my novel genes are changed. Are a little different." It's a kind of cheat. He used to play this game with Pauline, the two of them changing identities. Except he says, "I want Teller's genes. And I'm living on a distant, very alien world."

A narrow smile builds under the old eyes.

"Does that make any sense?" he asks somebody. Teller, or the Authority. Or maybe he's speaking to himself.

But it must make sense. Beside him, the last make-portal opens, and out flies an enormous metallic butterfly, accompanied by a wild music and a fragrance like sweat and cinnamon.

Or you somehow manage to escape suicide. You are just lucky enough, or maybe you're composed of sterner stuff. Either way, you find yourself

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alive. But the Authority still remains, and after some cold consideration, you decide that it is the central problem in your tiny life. Once the source of edification and strength, it is now something else entirely: A temptation and weakness, an affliction growing more dangerous with time, and a drug that has long ago scorched away your sites of delicious attachment.

A smart person knows what to do.

With strength and a steely resolve, anyone can save himself.

Give up the drug. Deny the enticement. The Authority is a piss hole, tiny and unworthy of your attentions. Tell it so. Declare that you won't visit again, and then don't. You might live another ten thousand years, and if you can't find the energy and focus to be busy for every moment, then you must not be trying very hard.

In this realm, in your life, you admit defeat. The Authority is too much of an attraction. So you walk away. Simply and forever, you leave temptation behind. Perhaps you join communities of like-minded souls. On distant moons, you and your new companions live like monks. Life is stripped to its minimal best. Horizons end at the horizon, and only a select few works of literature wait on the shelves, begging to be read again; and if it is true that every action and thought, achievement and failure are repeated endlessly throughout Creation...if originality is nothing but an illusion...well, at least inside these virtuous walls, amidst the dust and silent shadows, every little word you utter sounds fresh, and feels almost worthy....

CONQUERING THE SKY would be a child's waste of time.

But He is a grand, magnificent child. And like anyone with enough pride and simple vanity, He revels in His glorious undertaking. His first act is to boil the gray puddle to steam and smoke. Then with stirring words and programmed thoughts, He marshals His world, loyal slaves quickly fashioning a fleet of starships, each ship vast and swollen with fuel, armored and bristling with every awful weapon. Then from the underside of His own tiny phallus, The Divine One scrapes away a few living cells, coaxing each to divide and differentiate, a thousand clones of Himself grown in a thousand puddles of warm salty water.

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Each clone receives injections of memories and dreams.

While maturing, each baby is given the same powerful tools that have made His life such a perfect pleasure.

At some point, even The Divine One is uncertain who is the original among the Thousand and One. He is just another captain of a starship, His destination set, eyes forward. Their destinations are the thousand and one closest suns. The exhaust from so many great engines boils the Earth to a bubbling cherry-colored slag. But He pretends not to notice. Only the slaves look back at the dead world. They are checking the plasma flows, they claim. And none of them weep. They know better than to grieve. Weep, and die. That is His rule. The Earth was just a temporary island of rock and metal, they tell themselves, and it happens to be gone from here, while in a multitude of other realms, it lives on.

It is compelling, this idea of undiluted possibility.

The little gray ocean remains a promise — for the slaves, it is their only tangible sign that no existence, no matter how painful and wicked, has any genuine importance at all.

"And then my cocoon split on its sky-side," Josh reads aloud, "and what I saw first was my last skin smiling at me...."

He stops reading, setting down the butterfly book.

Teller watches him. A very old woman when this Earth discovered the Authority, her body has been regenerated by most means. But not in all places. The bare breasts have a telltale sag, and the pubic hair is shot full of white. Perhaps because of these details, Teller seems both exotic and uniquely handsome. It helps that she carries herself with a seamless confidence. Her smile is pleasant and wise, but distant, and it is the distance that often infuriates Josh. She knows something, he complains. Why won't she tell him what she knows?

"The creature is looking at her last skin," she offers. "The skin she was wearing before her pupa stage."

"I figured as much," he replies, attempting to laugh.

The alien is a much more complex species than humans. In one incarnation, she possessed a human's body and mind. Then she slept and grew, the human-like genes falling asleep too, a stew of new genes transforming her into something infinitely more marvelous.

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"I've never seen anything like this," Josh complains.

"Like what?"

"So different. So...bizarre...."

Deep eyes grow even more distant. What won't she tell him?

"The Authority doesn't pick at random," he says. "I've known that for years. Everybody knows it."

The distant smile brightens.

"Why show me this?" Josh asks. "Because I just tried to kill myself?"

She watches him.

"Or because you were with me, maybe?"

Her eyes lift higher. "I don't know," she responds, her voice quiet, nothing deceitful in its tone or her expression. "If either played a role in its choice, I can't say."

He jumps on one word. "Choice," he repeats. "So you know that it does. Choose, I mean."

She shrugs, pulling her young legs against her sagging breasts. "You haven't told me," she mentions. "What do you think about this strange lady?"

Josh has read the butterfly diary at least a dozen times, and there were little moments when he almost felt that he understood what the creature wrote. She wrote with scents. With an alphabet of pheromones. Yet despite the damage done by translations and the pervading alienness to every portion of this text, Josh feels an eerie sense that he already knows this Other. Understands her, even. That she is his friend, or some distant sister. Or she is the lover sitting in his own bed, watching him with her own secret gaze.

He closes the book, placing it back inside its cage.

In the corner of an eye, he sees a knowing grin. But her face goes blank when he looks straight at her.

Again, he says, "Thank you."

As always, she asks, "For what?" Then she shrugs, laughing with tenderness. "Like I told you. You came that day looking so sad and desperate, so alone, and I didn't want a mess."

"Did all of you come help me?"

The question is ludicrous, and he knows it. What Josh wants is to hear her answer and the tone of her voice.

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"Only me," she says.

Not true.

But then she touches his bare knee and smiles, asking, "Really now. How many more than one would have been enough?"

I am wings tied about a soul which flies past the skin of the sky, and I am enormous, and sometimes I am sad...I miss my legs, my walk...in my dreams, I am small and ugly, and happy...in my dreams, the sky is unreachable, and the sky could not be more magnificent....

Almost as easily as you kill yourself, you murder whole worlds.

Fusion exchanges. Nanochine blooms. Conscious plagues, or simple kinetic blasts. Your methods of annihilation run the gamut from what is likely to the slightly less likely, and your reasons are pulled from the same bloody mix of excuses: Self-hatred. Self-pity. Self-righteous fury. Or some little accident happens to slip tragically out of hand.

Every moment, you kill too many worlds to count.

And within each of those brutal moments, a trillion times as many worlds continue to prosper, happy and fertile beneath a loving, well-loved sun.

AFTER EONS of uninterrupted exploration and conquest, The Divine One finally discovers an opponent with real muscle and heart. The world has Jupiter's mass, oceans of acid sloshing against continents built of warm black iron. Its aliens are decidedly alien; their physiology, genetics, and basic morphology conform to an entirely different evolution. But they are organized, one leader at the helm and all the rest willingly enslaved. For thirty centuries, the war is a clash of equals. Yet The Divine One is quicker to adapt, at least in this one reality. He finds one tiny critical advantage, and in a matter of hours manages to defeat and butcher the entire alien horde. Then alone, He descends. He finds his opponent, the once-great despot, hiding inside a steel temple, and with a thought, He kills the creature. Kills it and drains it of its strange white blood, and tosses the corpse over the far horizon. Then He sets out to explore the broad hallways and giant rooms of the temple, examining sculptures made

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from body parts and images of parades celebrating suffering and sacrifice. His enemy was remarkably similar to Him. Despite all of their profound differences, they were very much the same. Here lived a god in mortal clothes, and what if He had spared the creature? What if they had spoken? How much more would they have found in common?

In the backmost room, behind a series of massive doors, He discovers the bottomless gray ocean waiting.

"What are you doing here?" The Divine One roars.

The Authority calls to Him by name, and then says, "Hello once again, my friend."

"You aren't the same puddle," He complains. "I don't believe this. What kind of trick is this?"

"Three offerings," the Authority calls out. "And as always, in return, I will give you three items of your choice."

The Divine One orders His journal brought to him. Riding in a high-gravity walker, a slave girl enters the room. Then He carves the journal into three equal hunks, each portion enormous, each describing a separate million years of wandering through the Milky Way. One after the other, the offerings sink into the thick gray fluid, and then with a quiet, decidedly unimpressed voice, the Authority says, "Accepted."

Standing beside the ocean, The Divine One shivers.

"Do you want your usual?" the Authority inquires. "Three genealogies leading up to lesser incarnations of yourself?"

"No," He whispers.

"No," He rumbles.

Then with a sorry shake of the head, He says, "Show me three journals. From minds like mine, and bodies that are not...."

Thinking the truth is easy. You fit together the puzzle more often than you realize, and in the normal course of days, you dismiss the idea as ludicrous or ugly, or useless or dull.

Understanding is less easy. You have to learn a series of words and the concepts that come attached to those words, and real understanding brings a kind of appreciation, cold and keen, not too different from the cutting edge of a highly polished razor blade.

But believing the truth...embracing the authentic with all of your

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self, conscious and otherwise...that is and will always be supremely difficult, if not outright impossible.

Josh sits alone, studying his lost love's journals.

"Something obvious occurred to me," he reads, hearing Pauline's soft voice. "And ever since, I can't think about anything else. But I can't talk about it, either. Not to anyone. Not even Josh. Not even after sitting here for an entire day, trying. I can't seem to put down a single word that hints at this thing that I know....

"How can I tell Josh? Show him? Help him see...?"

Closing the journal, Josh wipes at his eyes. And thinks. And after a very long while, with a courage barely equal to the task, he starts to examine every treasure that his lost love acquired over the last five years...given by an entity that does nothing by chance....

He cries for a while, and then He stops.

Another voice is crying. Astonishingly, He forgot about the slave girl. She remains inside the walker, waiting to be killed. Sad and hopeless, she wipes at her wet eyes, and her bladder lets loose a thin trickle of urine, and she very nearly begs. Please kill me now, she wishes, and remove me from all this misery...!

He won't.

With a gesture, He wraps her inside a more suitable exoskeleton. Then He beckons to her, saying, "Come here. Sit next to me."

She has to obey.

"Sit," He says again. And then, unexpectedly, He says, "Or stand. Whatever makes you happiest."

She kneels beside the bottomless ocean.

"Give it three offerings," He suggests. "Three things you have made, or written down. Three examples of yourself."

The girl nearly faints.

And then with a soft suspicious voice, she asks, "Why?"

But He cannot tell her why. That becomes instantly obvious. All that The Divine One can manage is to throw a warm arm around her naked shoulder, squeezing her with a reassuring strength, and with a mouth that is a little dry and a little nervous, he kisses her on the soft edges of her ear.

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* * *

Teller instantly senses that Josh knows.

Yet they still can't talk about it. Not directly. Not as long as some taste of ignorance remains in the world around them. What they can do is smile and hold hands, sharing an enlightened warmth, considering how the world will change when everyone understands.

Josh has already made his next appointment with the Authority.

As it happens, Teller is at work that day. She sits behind her usual desk, smiles and kisses him before he walks to the usual room. With the Authority, he can talk. With a genuine pride, he can tell it, "I understand now."

"I know," the voice purrs.

"It's really awfully simple," he says. "Looking back, I suppose I must have heard the idea, or thought it up for myself...I don't know, maybe a couple million times...?"

The silence has an approving quality.

"One soul," he says. "That's all there is. My old lover realized it when she read a book. A book of essays she'd written in another realm. As a little girl, the author was riding a horse through the woods. She found herself thinking about how she was riding past one tree, and past that tree was another tree that she was also riding past, just as she was passing the rest of the forest that lay beyond both trees. She was thinking how there was no clear point where she could say, 'I'm not riding past those faraway trees.'

"So if there was no end point, she reasoned, and if the world was truly round, then clearly, she was riding past every tree in the world. Thrilled with the idea, she rode straight home and told her mother. 'Run in a little circle,' she claimed, 'and the entire world passes by your shoulder.'

"To which her mother remarked, 'That's a very silly idea, my dear.'"

Josh pauses, sitting in the usual chair, placing the old gym bag between his feet.

"Pauline was pretty sharp. I can almost see how she got from there to the idea about there being just the one soul." He shrugs, admitting, "With me? I was lucky. In this one reality, I happened to stumble over the right thoughts. When I looked at other souls — when I asked you to show me someone with my genetics, or nearly so — I always considered that person

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as being me. Essentially. Like minds, and we were the same people. A shared incarnation, and all that. But if we were identical, and if souls a little farther out are the same as my neighboring soul...then they are the same as me, too...and we've got a situation where there's no logical or meaningful end...."

Quietly, the Authority says, "Yes."

"I belong to one vast soul," Josh mutters.

"You do," says the voice.

"And if there can be only one soul in the universe, then the two of us...well, I guess you and I are the same person, in essence...."

"Absolutely."

"That seems like a beautiful, joyous notion."

The silence is pleased.

"If not entirely original." Josh laughs, a disarming tone leading into the calm, simple question, "Why don't you just tell us? At the beginning, with our first meeting...why not say, 'This is the way it is'?"

"There are different ways to learn," the Authority replies.

"I suppose."

"To have a wonder explained to you is one thing. But to take a very long, arduous voyage, and then discover the same wonder with your own eyes and mind...isn't that infinitely more appealing, Josh...?"

He says nothing.

After a little pause, the Authority asks, "What three offerings do you have for me today, Josh?"

Reaching inside the gym bag, he says, "Actually, I brought just one little something."

"Yes?"

With both hands, Josh lifts his gift into the light. Maybe he hesitates, and maybe not. Perhaps in the distance somewhere, an alarm begins to wail. Then Josh strips the camouflage from his gift and his own mind, and with a low little voice, he says, "This is what I think," as he turns off the magnetic bottle, a lump of anti-iron beginning its inevitable descent toward the slick gray face of the ocean.

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Terry Bisson says he is formerly a Kentuckian who lived in New York but now he is a New Yorker who lives in California. He is the author of such novels as Talking Man, Voyage to the Red Planet, *and* The Pickup Artist. *His latest book is* Dear Abbey. *His new story has some of the magic that you find in Ray Bradbury's short fiction, but this one's wholly Bisson and its spell is potent.*

Almost Home

By Terry Bisson

1. the old race track

TROY COULD HARDLY WAIT until supper was over. He wanted to tell Toute what he had discovered; he wanted to tell Bug; he wanted to tell somebody. Telling made things real, but you had to have the right person to tell. This was not the sort of thing you told your parents.

He fidgeted at the dinner table, ignoring his father's gloomy silence and his mother's chatter. She was trying to cheer him up and failing, as always.

Troy cleaned his plate, which was the rule. First the meat, then the beans, then the salad. Finally! "Excuse me, may I be excused?"

"You don't have to run!" his father said.

I know I don't *have* to run, Troy thought as he hit six on the speed dial. Toute's line was busy. He wasn't surprised. It had been busy a lot lately.

He dialed Bug's number. "Excuse me, Mrs. Pass, may I speak with Bug, please?"

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"Clarence, it's for you!"

"Bug, it's me, listen. Guess what I found out. You know that white fence at the old race track? That broken down fence by the arcade?"

"The one with all the signs."

"That one. I just discovered something today. Something really weird. Something really strange. Something really amazing."

"Discovered what?"

"Well — " Suddenly Troy was reluctant to talk about it on the telephone. It seemed, somehow, dangerous. What if the grownups were to hear, and what if for some reason they weren't *supposed* to hear? It was always a possibility. Every kid knew that the world was filled with things that grownups didn't know, weren't supposed to know. Things that were out of the ordinary worried them. Worrying turned them into shouters. Or whisperers.

"Well, what?" Bug asked again.

"I can't talk about it now," Troy said, lowering his voice, even though his parents in the next room obviously weren't listening; they were having one of their whisper-arguments. "I'll tell you tomorrow. Meet me at the usual tree tomorrow, the usual time."

"I have practice."

"Not till afternoon. We'll have time to do some fishing."

The usual tree was at the corner of Oak and Elm; the usual time was as soon after breakfast as possible, allowing for the handful of chores required by Life with Parents: in Troy's case, garbage take-out and sweeping (for some reason) the crab apples and leaves from the driveway.

The old race track was at the edge of town, where the houses gave way to fields. There was no new race track, only the old one, long abandoned. It was just a dirt oval around a shallow lake that was all grown over with lily pads and green scum. Troy and Bug called it Scum Lake. That is, Troy called it Scum Lake and Bug went along. Bug generally went along.

The race track could have been for horses, but there were no stables. It could have been for cars, but there were no pits. No one seemed to remember who had built it or what it was for.

As they rode their bikes toward the track, Troy tried again to tell Bug what he had discovered. "You know the white fence along the infield, the

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one with all the signs on it? Well, yesterday, after you left for baseball, I climbed up into the stands, and when I looked down...."

"The stands! You climbed up there? They're so rickety, the whole thing could fall down!"

"Well, it didn't, and it won't if you watch your step. Anyway, here we are. I'll show you."

They parked their bikes by the chainlink fence. They didn't have to lock them. Nobody came by the old race track, and nobody stole in their town anyway. Sometimes Troy wished they did.

"Come on, and you'll see!" Troy led the way through the hole *something* (not they) had dug under the fence, and then through the dark tunnel under the stands, lined with dead soda machines. Bug carried his backpack with his ball glove in it, and Pop-Tarts for lunch. Usually they just headed across the track for the infield and the lake; but today, after they emerged into the bright sunlight, Troy led the way up into the stands, using the board seats for steps.

Troy knew Bug didn't like high places, but he knew he would follow. The planks wobbled and rattled and boomed with every step.

"The cheap seats," Troy said, sitting down on the top plank. Bug sat beside him, with his backpack between his feet. From here, they could see the entire track, with the lake in the middle; and beyond the backstretch, fields of beans in long straight rows; and beyond them, the dunes.

"I stayed yesterday, after you left for baseball," Troy said. "I like to come up here sometimes and read, or just look around. You know, imagine what it was like when there were cars on the track, or horses, you know?"

"I guess," said Bug, who was a little short on imagining things.

"Anyway, look at the fence from here." A white fence followed the track halfway around the infield side. It was broken into two parts, which met at an old enclosed plywood food arcade near the starting/finish line. The fence opposite the grandstands was almost straight, but the part that led toward the lake wandered crazily, left and then right. Parts of it were fallen, and other parts were still upright.

"What's that fence for? It doesn't keep anything out or in. And see how both ends come together at the arcade. Don't they look like two wings of a bird, but broken?"

"I guess," said Bug. "But...."

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"Plus, have you ever noticed how they aren't really very strong. They're made out of slats and wire and canvas, that white stuff."

"That's because they're just for signs." Bug read them aloud, like the answers on a test: "*Krazy Kandy, Drives You Wild. Buddy Cola — Get Together! Lectro with Powerful Electrolytes. Mystery Bread.*"

"Maybe. But maybe not," Troy said. "Maybe they are wings."

"Huh?"

"You can only see it from up here. See? They look like the wings of an airplane — an old fashioned airplane, an *aero*plane, all wood and wire and canvas. The wings meet at the arcade, which would be the fuselage." Troy was proud of his knowledge of airplanes, which he had gotten entirely from books. "The front end of the arcade, there, by the track, would be the cockpit."

Bug was skeptical. "So where's the tail? An airplane has to have a tail."

"The outhouse," said Troy, pointing to an old wooden outhouse at the far end of the arcade that had turned over and split into two parts. "It makes a V-tail, which some planes have. Everything looks like something else, don't you see? If it was a crashed airplane, that crashed here a long time ago, and it was too big to move or get rid of, they would've just built a race track around it so that nobody would know what it was, because that would give away the secret."

"What secret?" Bug asked.

"The secret that it is an airplane," said Troy.

"I guess," said Bug, picking up his backpack and starting down. "But now it's time to go fishing."

With Bug, it was always time to go fishing. Fishing in Scum Lake was sort of like ice fishing, which neither of them had ever done, but Troy had read about in a magazine. You made a hole in the ice (or scum) that covered the lake, then dropped in your line and waited. But not for long. The little bluegill were so eager to get caught that they fought over the hook; they would take worms or cheese, but worms were better.

Troy and Bug climbed down from the stands, rattling the planks, and walked across the track to the infield. They slipped through a fallen section of fence, or wing, and followed the short path through the reeds to

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the lake. Their fishing poles were under the dock, where they had hidden them. Digging under an old tire, they found worms.

They sat on the end of the dock and caught bluegills, then threw them back. They were too little to eat, but that was okay; there were plenty of Pop-Tarts. Troy caught eleven and Bug caught twenty-six. Bug usually caught more. Troy was careful taking out the hooks. He wondered if it actually hurt the fish.

He was beginning to suspect that it did.

The bluegill weren't the only fish in Scum Lake. There was also a catfish as big as a rowboat. Troy had seen it once, from the end of the dock, when the light and shadow were just right. Bug had seen it, once, sort of; at least he said he had.

After he had caught his first "rerun," Troy quit fishing. He left the line in the water, just to make Bug happy, but left off the worm. It was fun just to sit in the Sun and talk about things. Troy did most of the talking, as usual; Bug was content to just listen. "Didn't you ever wonder how everybody got to our town?" Troy asked.

"In one little airplane?"

"It's pretty big. Then they multiplied. Didn't you ever wonder why they are all so much alike?"

"I guess. But I have to go to practice."

They hid their poles and started back toward the stands. On the way, Troy walked off the two ends of the infield fence. The two sections had different signs — *Buddy Cola, Krazy Kandy, Oldsmobile* — but were exactly the same length. Didn't that prove that they were, in fact, wings? And the arcade where they met definitely could have been the fuselage. It was about twenty feet long, with a flat roof; one side was open above waist-high counters.

"I'm going in," Troy said, climbing over a counter on the open side. Bug grumbled but passed in his backpack and followed. The roof and the floor were plywood. The roof was low enough to reach up and touch. They had to duck under a three-bladed ceiling fan. Troy reached up and spun it with his hand.

"It stinks in here," said Bug, wrinkling his nose.

"Mouse droppings," said Troy.

"What's that?"

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"Mouse crap. Mouse shit," said Troy. "Let's look up front."

"All right but it's getting late."

The plywood floor creaked as they walked, bent over, toward the front of the arcade, where a dirty glass window overlooked the track. Under the window, there was an old-fashioned radio, filled with dusty vacuum tubes of all different sizes. It sat on a low shelf next to an ashtray filled with white sand.

"Here we have the cockpit," said Troy. "The control center. Why else would there be a radio?"

"Announcers," said Bug. "Anyway, I have to go to practice."

"Okay, okay," said Troy. He climbed out and helped Bug with his backpack. He stopped at the entrance to the tunnel and looked back. Even from the ground now it looked like an airplane. He didn't need to be up in the stands to see it. It just took a little imagination.

"What about a propeller?" said Bug. "An old airplane, made out of wood and canvas, would have a propeller."

True, thought Troy, as they descended into the tunnel. But not true in a way that opened up possibilities. True in a way that closed them down; not the kind of true he liked.

They rode together to the usual tree, before riding off in different directions. Bug lived in the old section of town, with all the trees. Troy lived in one of the new, big houses on the way to the mall.

"See you tomorrow," said Bug.

"I may not make it tomorrow," said Troy. "I have to go to the mall with my cousin."

"The bent girl? She's so bossy!"

"She's okay," said Troy.

2. the bent girl

TOUTE WAS TROY'S COUSIN but more like his sister, especially since he didn't have a sister. When they were kids he and Toute had slept together and even bathed together, until they got old enough for the grownups to realize that, hey, one's a boy and one's a girl.

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Toute was eleven, almost a year older than Troy. She got her name because when she was little, her mother had taken her to Quebec for treatments, and she had learned to say "Toute" for everything.

Toute means everything in French, which was funny, Troy thought, because Toute got hardly anything. First her mother died. Then she got more and more bent until she could hardly walk, and couldn't ride a bicycle at all. Once a week she went to a special doctor in the mall, and Troy went with her so they could pretend it was a trip for fun. But it wasn't much fun. Usually Toute was worn out from the treatments, and sometimes she looked like she had been crying.

The next morning Troy rode his bike to Toute's house, which was not far from the usual tree. There was an extra car in the driveway. The door was open. Toute's father and two strange men were in the living room, talking in whispers.

Toute was sitting on the stairs. She looked gloomy but she smiled when she saw Troy. "I had a dream about you last night," she said. "I dreamed you had your own airplane and you took me for a ride."

"No way!" said Troy. He sat down beside her and told her what he had discovered at the race track. Now he was more convinced than ever that it was real.

"Get my backpack," Toute said. "It's up in my room. Let's go."

"Don't you have to go to the mall for that treatment?"

"They're discontinuing it," Toute said emphatically, as if *discontinue* were something you actually did instead of stopped doing. "So I'm free all day. Get a bottle of Lectro out of the fridge. We can leave a note for my dad."

Toute sat on the crossbar of Troy's bike. She could sit okay, though she couldn't stand without holding onto something. They rode by the usual tree, just in case — and there was Bug.

"Where did she come from?" he asked Troy. "I thought you said you and her had to go to the mall."

"I want to see the airplane," said Toute.

"She wants to go fishing with us," Troy said.

"She doesn't have a fishing pole," Bug pointed out.

"She can use mine," said Troy.

They parked their bikes against the chainlink fence and crawled

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under. Toute was pretty good at that part; then she had to hold on between the two boys as they walked though the tunnel, past the dark abandoned drink machines.

Troy was wondering how he was going to get Toute up into the stands. It turned out not to be a problem. As soon as they emerged from the tunnel into the light, Toute blinked twice and said:

"Definitely an aeroplane."

"Huh?" said Bug.

"Aer-o-plane," she said, pronouncing each syllable. "More old fashioned than an airplane. All wood and canvas. Let's look inside."

"It's just some old plywood," said Bug, but Troy and Toute were already heading across the track.

The boys helped Toute over the counter on the open side, and climbed in after her.

"Smells in here," said Toute, wrinkling her nose.

"Mouse droppings," said Bug.

"Here's the cockpit," said Troy. He tried to wipe the window clean but most of the dirt was on the outside.

"And here's the main power control," said Toute.

"That's the radio," Troy said.

"It's a receiver," said Toute. "It can draw power out of the air. There's a lot of radio waves flopping around out there that never get used. Turn it on."

Troy turned the biggest dial, in the center, to the right, then to the left. "Nothing."

"And here's why. This battery is bone dry," said Toute, stirring the white sand in the ashtray. "Hand me my Lectro, Bug. It's in my backpack."

She was too bent to reach into her own backpack. Bug grumbled but did it for her, handing her the plastic bottle. She poured a narrow stream of clear liquid into the white sand ashtray, making a damp spiral in the sand.

"What does that do?" asked Troy.

"Lectro has powerful electrolytes," Toute said, as she handed the bottle back to Bug. "You can put this back now."

"Thanks," Bug said sarcastically as he put it back. "Isn't it time to go fishing?"

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* * *

Bug caught twenty-one bluegills, and Troy caught sixteen. Even Toute, a girl, caught eleven, on a handline.

Troy quit when he caught his first rerun, but Toute kept going. "I don't know why everybody feels sorry for the fish," she said. "I feel sorry for the worms."

"You get over feeling sorry for the worms," said Bug.

Toute was so bent that she had to sit sideways on the dock. "What I really want is to see this giant catfish you are always talking about."

"It's best on a cloudy day," said Troy. "Then the light doesn't reflect off the surface of the water, and you can see all the way to the bottom."

Just then a cloud passed over the Sun. They all three crawled to the edge of the dock; Troy made a hole in the scum with his hands. They could see all the way to the bottom, the little waving weeds and a few small fish, examining an old tire. But there was no giant catfish.

"It may be an urban myth," Toute said.

"What's that?" asked Bug.

"You're forgetting one thing," said Troy. "I saw it myself."

"Bug, did you see it?"

"I think I did," Bug said.

"I want to see it myself," said Toute. "Troy makes things up sometimes."

Troy felt betrayed. It was Toute who had showed him the Teeny-Weenies who lived in the roots of a tree in her yard. He tried to remember if he had really seen them or just wanted to see them. He couldn't remember.

Bug had two Pop-Tarts in his backpack, which they shared three ways. They had to take their lines out of the water to eat, because the fish were so eager to get caught.

They were just finishing the Pop-Tarts and putting their poles back into the water when Troy heard something strange. "What was that?"

"What?" said Bug.

"Sounds like groaning," Toute said.

"The wind," said Bug.

"I don't think so," said Toute. "Better go see."

Troy left his pole in the water and went to investigate. The infield

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section of fence was tipped over until it was almost flat on the ground. The other side, along the track, had fallen, too. Lying down, the fence looked more like a wing than ever.

"The wind probably blew it over," said Bug, when Troy returned.

"There isn't any wind," Troy said.

"There may be at the other end," Bug suggested. "The fence is all connected. And anyway — "

"There it is again," said Troy.

They all three heard it this time: a groan, a rattle, a splintering sound like a branch breaking.

"Sounds like the mating call of a tyrannosaur," said Toute.

They put away the poles and went to investigate, all three this time. Toute walked between the two boys, an arm around each shoulder. Her feet barely touched the ground.

Both fences were now completely flat. The front of the arcade was now sticking out onto the track; it had dragged the ends of the fences with it.

"The wings are swept back, like a jet," said Troy.

The outhouse on the back had tipped so that now it looked more like a V-shaped tail than ever. They could enter the arcade through it without climbing over the counter.

"Ugh, it stinks," said Toute. "It's like the butt."

The tubes in the radio were glowing. Toute held her hand over them, palm down. "It's warming up," she said. "Bug, the Lectro. In my backpack."

"You don't have to be so bossy," he said, even as he was opening it.

"Sorry," she said (though she didn't sound sorry). "You'd be bossy too if you were so bent you couldn't reach into your own backpack."

"No, I wouldn't," said Bug. He handed her the Lectro, and she poured half the bottle into the sand.

"What happened to the fan?" asked Troy, looking up. The ceiling fan was gone.

"I have practice," said Bug.

Toute gave Bug the Lectro to put back in her pack. They helped her out over the counter on the open side, because she didn't like the smell in the "butt." None of them did.

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They walked around to the front. "Whoa, there's the fan!" said Bug. "Now it does look like an airplane."

"Aeroplane," said Troy. The ceiling fan was on the front of the fuselage, just under the front window. It was turning slowly, even though there was no breeze.

Troy stopped it with his hand. When he let go, it started up again.

"This is getting weird," he said.

"We're going to get blamed for this," said Bug. "Let's get out of here."

"Blamed for what? Blamed by who?" asked Toute.

"For making things different."

"Don't be silly," she said. But even she seemed uncomfortable. She got between the two boys and they started through the tunnel.

Troy stopped for one last look. Was it his imagination, or had the aeroplane turned, just a little, so that it was starting to point down the track?

"It's growing, like a plant," Toute said. "Can we come back tomorrow and see what it's grown into?"

"I guess," said Troy.

"I have practice every day this week," said Bug.

"What did you kids do today?" Troy's father asked that night at the table.

"Nothing much," said Troy. "I took Toute for a ride on my bike."

"That's nice," said Troy's mother. "You should take her again tomorrow. Her father has discontinued her treatments, and she...."

"Claire!" said Troy's father sharply. Then they started one of their whisper arguments.

"Can I be excused?" asked Troy. He wanted to go to his room and think about the aeroplane. He was wondering if it would still be there the next day; wondering if it would fly.

3. into the air

The next morning Toute was waiting on her front steps, with her backpack on.

"Don't go in," she said. "It's chaos in there." Chaos was one of her favorite words.

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She perched on Troy's crossbar and they rode to the usual tree and picked up Bug. "I brought three Pop-Tarts today," he said.

They left the bikes in the weeds and crawled under the fence and hurried through the tunnel.

They emerged into the light — and there it was. Bug was the first to speak.

"It moved."

The aeroplane — for there was no longer any doubt what it was — was halfway on the track. The front of the arcade, the fuselage, was angled across the start-finish line, pointing up the track. The outhouse was split into a V-tail. The right wing was still in the infield, but the end of the left one drooped onto the hard clay of the track.

The ceiling fan on the front, under the windshield, was turning, very slowly. There were two spoked wheels under the front of the fuselage, though the back still dragged in the dirt.

"It even has wheels," said Troy. He noticed that two wheels were missing off a tipped-over hot dog cart nearby.

"Of course," said Toute. "It wants to be what we want it to be. An aeroplane."

"Maybe it's some kind of car," said Bug.

"With wings? Give me a boost," said Toute. They lifted her through the side window into the plane, and then followed after her. The plywood creaked under their feet.

The tubes in the radio were barely glowing. Toute stirred the white sand with her fingertips. "Needs more Lectro."

"Turn around, I'll get it out of your pack," said Troy.

"I forgot to bring it," said Toute.

"I thought you always carried Lectro," Bug said.

"I forgot it," said Toute. "Just because I don't have practice doesn't mean I don't have a lot of things to worry about."

"There's a Lectro machine in the tunnel," said Troy. "But it's dead."

"Not exactly," said Bug.

"What do you mean?" Toute asked.

"If I get you your Lectro, can we go fishing?"

"Deal," said Toute.

* * *

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Toute and Troy watched from inside the aeroplane while Bug climbed out and crossed the track, and descended into the tunnel. "Aren't you curious?" Toute asked.

"I guess." Troy climbed out and followed, at a distance, like a spy.

At the bottom of the tunnel, where it was darkest, the drink machines sat against one wall. There were three of them. Troy had always thought they looked like lurking monsters.

Bug walked up to the center machine and, after looking both ways, kicked it at the bottom.

A light inside came on, illuminating the logo on the front of the machine. *Lectro! With Powerful Electrolytes!*

Bug looked both ways again, then hit the machine once with the heel of his right hand, right under the big L.

A coin dropped into the coin return slot with a loud *clink*.

Cool, thought Troy. Bug had hidden talents.

Bug dropped the coin into the slot at the top of the machine and hit a square button.

A plastic bottle rumbled into the bin at the bottom.

Troy stepped out of the shadows, clapping.

Bug jumped — then grinned when he saw who it was. "I didn't know you were there."

"You have hidden talents!"

"Just because you never notice them doesn't mean they're hidden," Bug said, starting up the tunnel, toward the daylight.

"It's warm," said Bug, as he handed the bottle through the big side window into the plane.

"That's okay," said Toute. She poured half the bottle into the sand. "It's not for drinking. Look."

Troy could see the radio under the front windshield. The tubes were starting to glow, just a little.

He reached for the fan. It started to turn on its own, before he could touch it. He pulled his hand back. Weird!

"I thought we were supposed to go fishing," Bug said.

"Deal," said Toute. "Just give me a hand out of here."

* * *

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Bug caught twelve and Troy caught nine and even Toute, the girl, caught six. Then they ate their Pop-Tarts. Bug had brought one for each of them this time.

"What's that noise?" said Bug.

They all heard it: a low groaning sound, from the race track.

"I'll go see," said Troy.

"I'm going too," said Toute, grabbing his shoulder.

The plane was all the way on the track. The wings were straight, no longer swept back; they drooped at the ends, so that the tips touched the clay. The fan, in the front of the fuselage, was turning so fast that Troy couldn't make out the individual blades.

"This is too weird," he said.

"Or just weird enough," said Toute. "Give me a boost." He helped her inside and followed after her. The tubes in the radio were glowing. Troy put his hand over them; they were warm, like a fire.

"What are you doing?" he asked Toute.

"What do you think?" She was pouring more Lectro into the sand. The fan was turning faster. A weird creaking came from under the floor. Troy knew what it was without looking — the wire wheels turning.

The plane was moving slowly down the straightaway toward the first turn. The fan turned faster and faster, but never as fast as a real propeller on a real airplane. Troy could still see the blades, like a shadow, under the front window — or rather, windshield.

"That's enough!" he said. Toute put the cap back on the Lectro bottle. There was only about an inch left.

"Wait!" It was Bug. He was running alongside, trying to carry his backpack in one hand and grab the wing with the other. "Slow down!"

"No brakes!" Troy hadn't realized the plane was going so fast. And it was going faster all the time. The wingtips were off the ground. "Throw me your backpack," he said.

Bug threw his backpack in through the big side window, then scrambled in behind it. "Careful!" said Toute. "Don't kick a hole in the wing!"

"Oooomph!" said Bug, landing with a loud thump on the plywood floor. "How do we stop this thing?"

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"Why would we want to stop it?" Toute was in the front, by the radio, staring straight ahead, down the track. "Troy, come up here! You have to steer."

"Me?" Troy tried to walk. The plane was lurching from side to side. The wheels were squealing and the plywood was creaking and rattling.

"It's your plane," Toute said. "You discovered it."

"I just found it, that's all," said Troy, joining her at the windshield. "Uh oh!"

The plane was almost at the first turn. It was going to run off the track and into the grass. Maybe, Troy thought, that would be best. It would bounce to a stop and —

"Try the knobs," said Toute.

There were three knobs on the radio. The one in the center was the biggest. Troy turned it to the right, and the plane turned to the right, just a little.

He turned it more.

The plane lumbered on around the first turn, the left wing tip just brushing the weeds at the edge of the track. Troy turned the knob back so the notch was at the top. The plane started down the back straightaway, going faster and faster.

"Fasten your seat belts!" said Toute.

"I don't like this," said Bug.

Troy couldn't decide if he liked it or not. The trees and weeds seemed to speed past, as the plane bounced and rattled down the track. It seemed to Troy that it was the world that was sliding backward while the plane was standing still. Well, almost still; it was bouncing up and down and weaving from side to side.

The little fan was spinning soundlessly under the windshield. Troy had read enough about airplanes to know that it was not nearly big enough to make the plane move. But the plane was moving.

It was not nearly big enough to make the plane fly.

But —

"Whoa!" said Bug.

"We're flying," said Toute. "We're in the air."

It was true. The wheels were no longer squealing and the plywood floor was no longer bouncing up and down. Troy looked down. The track

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was dropping away, like a rug being pulled out from under them. They were approaching the finish line, where they had started, but this time they were almost as high as the stands — and getting higher.

"Okay, now make it go down," said Bug, looking out the side window.

"Hold on!" said Toute. "Everybody hold on."

Bug made his way to the front and squeezed in between Troy and Toute. "Okay, now make it go down," he said again. "Seriously."

Troy turned the center knob to the right, and the plane banked, following the curve of the track. He started to straighten it for the back straightaway, but Toute pulled his hand away.

"Leave it," she said. "Circling is good."

The circles got wider and wider as the plane got higher and higher.

Below they could see the whole track, with Scum Lake in the center, bright green. There was the chain link fence, with their bikes in the weeds beside it.

There were the streets, the houses, the trees: all in miniature, seen from above.

Troy checked the wings, to the right and to the left. They were straight, then bent upward slightly at the tip. The canvas was stretched tight, except for a few wrinkles that flapped in the wind.

"We're going to get in trouble," said Bug.

Troy and Toute said nothing. What was there to say? They stood on either side of Bug, looking out of the front of the plane as it circled wider, leaving the track behind. There was the usual oak, and Toute's house, with several strange cars in the driveway.

"Doctors," she said scornfully. "Big meeting today."

There was the school, shut down for the summer. The baseball diamond in the back was empty. "At least you're not late for practice," said Troy.

"Not yet," said Bug. "Can't you make it go back to the track?"

"It seems to know where it wants to go," said Troy. "Like a horse or a dog."

"I never had a horse," Toute said wistfully. "Or a dog." Then she clapped her hands. "But this is better!"

The circles got wider and wider and higher and higher. They flew over

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the center of town. The clock on the courthouse tower said 12:17. A few cars scooted through the streets, under the trees. It was so quiet below that they could hear a screen door slam. They heard a dog bark.

A few people walked on the sidewalks, but they never looked up. *People in our town never look up,* Troy thought. And it was a good thing, too. What would they see? A plywood plane with long, square-tipped, white canvas wings, soaring higher and higher.

At the edge of town, Troy could see the bean fields and a couple of run-down farmhouses; and then the green fields gave way to yellow dunes, some of them as high as a house.

It was just as Troy had always suspected. The town was surrounded by a wilderness of sand. There wasn't a road or even a path leading in or out, as far as he could see.

Troy turned the knob back to the left, so that the notch pointed straight up.

The right wing creaked and came up, the left wing dropped, just a little, and the plane flew straight toward the edge of town.

"Whoa," said Bug, looking alarmed. "What are you doing?"

"Leveling off," Troy said, "Straightening up. Don't you want to see what's out there?"

"No way."

"Out where?" Toute asked.

"Past the town. Past the fields. On the other side of the dunes."

4. across a sea of sand

THE PLANE FLEW straight, soundlessly.

It flew straight past the courthouse, between the water tower and the church steeple.

The trees gave way to fields, edged with fences. The last street became a dirt road. Someone was riding a bicycle; someone who didn't look up. The road ended in a field of grass, and the grass gave way to sand.

"I don't think we're supposed to fly out here," said Bug.

"We're not supposed to fly, period," Toute pointed out.

The dunes lapped like waves at the edge of the grass. At first there

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were patches of grass in the hollows between them; then that green, too, was gone, and all was sand, yellow sand.

"Nothing but sand," said Toute. She looked almost scared.

"Just as I always suspected," said Troy. "Though nobody talks about it, ever." The dunes went on and on as far as he could see. He leaned out the side window and looked back. The town was an island of trees in a sea of sand. It looked too impossibly tiny to be the town where they had all lived, until this very moment

And it was getting smaller and smaller.

"Time to turn around," said Bug.

"Not yet," said Troy. "Don't you want to know what's out here?"

"No."

"Nothing but sand," said Toute. "A sea of sand."

The plane flew on. Troy stood at the front, at the controls, with his hand on the knob. There was nothing but yellow desert in every direction as far as he could see.

He looked back. The town was just a dark smudge against the horizon. Maybe it was time to turn back.

He turned the knob to the right.

Nothing happened. He turned it back to the left, but the plane flew on, straight. He wiggled the knob from side to side.

Nothing.

"What's the matter?" Toute asked.

"Nothing."

Troy turned the knob each way again, then straightened it with the notch at the top. No need to tell the others; not yet, anyway. It would just worry them.

He stood at the front with his hand on the knob. The sand looked the same in every direction. There were a few smudges of grass, an occasional dark spot where a dead tree poked up through the drifts. But no roads, no houses, no fences.

The plane flew on, tirelessly, soundlessly. Troy stuck his face out the left side, into the wind. The air was hot. It felt like they were going a little faster than a bicycle; a little faster than a boy could run.

"We don't have any food or water," said Bug.

"I have food," said Toute. "Look in my backpack."

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Bug pulled out a Pop-Tart. He handed it to Toute, and she sat down beside him and broke it into three pieces.

Troy put his piece on the shelf beside the radio. He was too nervous to eat. He was afraid that if he let go of the knob, the plane would spin to the ground, or fall, or lose its way. He took his hand off the knob, as an experiment; nothing happened. But he felt better at the controls.

"What about water?" said Bug.

Toute passed him the Lectro. "Just a sip," she said. "We may need the electrolytes for power."

"None for me," said Troy.

He looked back toward the town and saw that even the smudge was gone.

He didn't tell Toute and Bug. He didn't want to alarm them. They were sitting on the floor, finishing their Pop-Tarts. The next time he looked Bug was asleep, with his head on Toute's bent, bony little shoulder.

Troy wanted to tell Toute not to worry — or was it himself he wanted to reassure? No matter: when he started to speak she smiled and put her finger to her lips. The next time Troy looked back, she was asleep too.

The dusty vacuum tubes still glowed hot. The fan was turned steadily, a circular shadow pulling them silently through the air.

Troy studied the dunes, looking for landmarks, anything that would mark their way back. Airplanes don't leave tracks. The dunes were like waves, featureless. He searched to the left and the right, but he couldn't even find their shadow passing over the sand.

There were a few shapes in the distance, dark moving specks that might have been rabbits, or horses, or antelopes. It was hard to tell their size or shape.

Then they, too, were gone.

And it was just sand, a sea of yellow sand.

5. another town

"Look!"

Troy opened his eyes, wider. Had they been closed? Had he been sleeping?

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Toute was standing at his side, holding onto his shoulder. Her grip was so strong it almost hurt.

"There's something up ahead."

Bug scrambled to his feet and joined them. Below the windshield, the fan was spinning away. The plane was flying smoothly, silently.

Ahead there was a dark smudge against the horizon.

"Did you turn around?" Toute asked.

"No, why?"

"Because!" Because the smudge ahead looked familiar. The dark was trees. Streets, houses. As they grew closer they saw the water tower, the steeple, the courthouse.

"We're back," said Toute. She sounded disappointed. "You must have turned the plane around."

"I didn't turn anything," said Troy. "Maybe it's like Columbus. You know, all the way around the world."

"Columbus didn't go all the way around the world," said Toute. "And besides, the world is a lot bigger around than that. I hope."

"There's the courthouse," said Bug. "Fly past it so I can see what time it is. Maybe I won't be late for baseball."

"I'll try," said Troy.

As the sand gave way to fields, and then tree-lined streets, the plane responded to the turning of the knob. Troy turned it to the right, and the plane banked right; left, and it banked left. Very gently. Troy was careful to keep it headed for the race track, now barely visible on the other side of town.

"Where's the clock?" Bug asked.

There was no clock on the courthouse tower.

"That's weird plus," said Toute, as they flew past.

Everything else was the same. There was the downtown, with a few people walking around. The same people? They were so small, it was impossible to tell.

There was the school, shut down for summer. The baseball diamond was no longer empty though. There were a few ballplayers, hitting flies.

"Whoa, I'm late," said Bug.

"It looks like they're just starting," said Troy. "You can still make it."

"And there's my house!" said Toute. The driveway was empty, except for her father's Windstar.

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"Looks like all the doctors have gone," said Troy.

"Good. You should hear them talk. They all talk in big whispers."

Bug was silent, grim, looking worried. Troy ignored him and concentrated on the old race track, still far ahead. It seemed that the plane was going slower. It was starting to descend, toward the treetops.

He put his hand over the tubes. "They're not as warm as they were."

"We're losing altitude!" said Bug, pointing at the treetops, getting closer.

Toute opened the Lectro bottle. There was an inch left. She poured it into the sand.

The tubes responded instantly, glowing brighter. The plane nosed up slightly, just clearing the last trees before the old race track. Troy turned the knob to the right and the plane started to circle over the track, going slower and slower.

"It knows how to land," Troy said. "It's like a horse; it knows where to go."

He hoped it was true. Toute and Bug didn't look convinced.

Lower and lower they went. The fan was turning so slowly that Troy could see the individual blades, flashing in the Sun. He kept his hand on the knob but the plane followed the track on its own, gliding down over the stands.

The fan was spinning slower and slower; the tubes were glowing dimmer and dimmer.

"Fasten your seat belts," said Troy.

"What seat belts!?"

"It was a joke, Bug." Troy held onto the edge of the shelf that held the radio; Bug held onto the edge of the side window; and Toute held onto both of them as the plane hit the clay track —

It hit, bounced, hit again, bounced. The left wingtip scraped the track, raising a little cloud of dust. The plane hit again, rocked from side to side, rolled —

And rolled to a stop.

Troy opened his eyes and saw Toute just opening hers. Her face was filled with a big grin, a grin that was bigger than she was. She started to clap her hands and Troy joined them, finally realizing that they were not applauding him but the aeroplane.

Bug opened his eyes and joined in.

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* * *

"Hooray," said Troy.

"But we're on the wrong side of the track," said Bug.

It was true. They were on the back side of the lake, in the middle of the back straightaway.

"So what?" asked Toute.

"How will we we explain how it got here," said Bug. "On the wrong side of the track?"

"Who cares?" said Troy. "No one knows we did it."

"They'll know now," said Bug.

"Then we'll taxi," said Toute. She shook the last few drops of Lectro into the sand. The tubes glowed warm again.

The fan, still spinning, spun faster, and the aeroplane moved off at a walk, lumbering around the track with the wings dragging and the wheels creaking. The tubes died again and the plane stopped exactly where it had started, in front of the stands at the start/finish line.

"Later!" Bug tossed his backpack out the side window. "I have my glove in my backpack," he explained, climbing out after it. He stopped and looked back in. "Can you make it okay?"

"I'll help her," said Troy.

"I can make it," said Toute. "Go on ahead."

Bug waved and disappeared into the tunnel, running for his bike.

"So here we are," said Toute. "But...."

"But what?"

"Doesn't it look a little different?"

"The stands," said Troy. They seemed smaller. And there was no wheelless, tipped-over hot dog cart.

"Maybe it's just my imagination," said Toute. She put her arm around Troy's shoulder and they climbed out the back, through the outhouse/tail. It didn't stink as badly as before.

The stands definitely seemed smaller, thought Troy. Some of the board seats were missing. He decided not to mention it; it seemed best not to notice.

With Toute hanging onto his side, they went through the tunnel. It was as dark as before, and there were the machines, lurking in the darkness like waiting monsters. Two of them; hadn't there been three?

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Troy wasn't sure, and again, it seemed best not to notice. They hurried on through, into the sunlight on the other side.

"Uh oh," said Toute.

The chainlink fence was gone — and worse.

Bug was kicking the weeds, his fists clenched. "My bicycle is gone," he said. "Somebody stole my bicycle!"

True. There was Troy's bike, in the weeds where he had left it — but all alone.

"Maybe somebody found it and took it home for you," said Troy. Even though he didn't believe it.

"Yeah," said Toute. "Everybody knows your bike." It was a Blizzard Trailmaster, with front and rear shocks.

"Let's go," said Troy. "You can still make it to practice."

They walked to Toute's house, pushing Troy's bike between them, with Toute on the handlebars; they dropped her off, and continued to the usual tree.

"Go ahead and take my bike to practice," said Troy.

"It's okay," said Bug, who clearly thought it wasn't. "It's too late anyway."

True: it was getting dark. Bug waved good-bye and started walking home dejectedly.

Troy felt bad. But not too bad. Missing practice seemed a small price to pay for such an adventure. *Bug will get over it,* Troy thought. *He'll remember this and thank me someday.*

Troy rode on home, through the darkening streets. His house was lit up when he got there. And there was a visitor. A little red sportscar was parked in the drive. It was a Miata; or rather, almost a Miata. The rear end looked different, and the grill was painted instead of chromed. Maybe a custom?

Troy started around the side of the house, toward the back door — and then stopped.

There was his father in the kitchen, talking to his mother, who was standing at the sink in a yellow dress. But he was smoking a cigarette! And he had a little mustache.

Troy reached for the doorknob — then stopped again. The woman at

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the sink had turned around. It wasn't his mother at all. She was wearing his mother's yellow dress, but she was younger, with shorter hair and bright red lipstick.

Troy backed up, into the shadow of the trees, almost tripping on the crab apples that littered the ground — the same crab apples he had raked up just the day before. There was a smell of weeds and rot. He watched while his father lit a cigarette and passed it to the woman — not his mother! — who took a drag and then laughed.

A strange laugh, Troy thought, even though he couldn't hear it through the glass. His father gave her a pat on the bottom and they both left the room.

Troy was frozen. He couldn't move and couldn't think. He didn't know where to go or what to think. It was his house, and yet it wasn't. It was his father, but it wasn't; and it was not his mother at all. The kitchen, he noticed for the first time, was painted a different color, although it was the same kitchen.

He tried to remember what color it had been. Yellow, like the strange woman's dress. This kitchen was more the color of sand.

I'll knock on the door and demand to know what's happening, he thought. *No, I'll slip upstairs to my room and...No, I'll run away, back to the race track, and....*

And what? He was just starting to get upset when he heard a sound from the trees across the street.

Who-hoot.

Who-hoot.

It was a hoot owl call. Troy stepped out of the shadows and looked toward the street.

There was Bug.

"I found my bike," he said in a loud whisper.

"Where was it? Where is it?" Bug was on foot.

"At home. But something is weird!"

"I know," said Troy. "Here, too. My parents are strange. And my mother is not my mother."

"Come on," said Bug. "Ride me on your bike, back to my house. I'll show you what I mean."

They rode silently through the empty streets to Bug's house, on the

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other side of town. They left the bike on the street and went around to the back of the house. Through the window, they could see Bug's parents sitting down to dinner. There at the table was — Bug.

"Uh oh," said Troy. "That's you."

"Not me," Bug whispered. "I'm right here."

"Who is it, then?" The boy at the table looked exactly like Bug except that he was wearing a red shirt that said X-TREME. Bug's T-shirt said GO AHEAD, HAVE A COW.

"I think it's my brother," said Bug.

"But you don't have a brother."

"I did, though. I was supposed to," said Bug. "When I was born I had a twin, but he died. I never knew about it but my mom told me once."

"And that's him?"

"She even named him," said Bug. "His name was Travis, after my dad. That's why I wasn't named after my dad."

Bug's real name was Clarence. He had always hated it.

They crept around the side of the house, by the garage. "And there's my bike."

It was leaning against the garage door. A Blizzard Trailmaster with front and rear shocks.

"Well, get it and let's go," said Troy. "Let's get out of here. This is not our town. Something is wrong."

They rode through the dark, empty streets to Toute's house. They sneaked around to the back, but they couldn't see anything. Toute's house didn't have a kitchen window.

"Just go to the door," said Bug.

"I'm afraid to," said Troy.

"You started all this. Plus, you're her cousin. Nobody will think it's weird if you knock on the door."

Bug hid in the bushes while Troy rang the bell. Instead of the usual ring it played a little song, twice.

Toute came to the door. She was wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Fried chicken," she said.

"Something is wrong," Troy said, whispering.

"I know," said Toute. "I knew it was you. Here." She handed him something wrapped in a greasy paper napkin.

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Bug came out of the bushes. "What's that?"

"Fried chicken!"

"We're in the wrong place," said Troy. "My parents are all strange. And Bug's too."

"I know," said Toute. "Mine, too."

"Who's at the door?" a voice called out from inside.

"Just some friends," said Toute. She dropped her voice. "That was my mother. My mother is alive here. She cooked fried chicken! And look, I can walk." She walked in a little circle. "A little sideways, but I can walk."

"That's great, but we've got to get out of here," said Troy.

"We're in the middle of dinner," said Toute. "I'm coming, Mom!" she yelled. Then she whispered again: "You guys have to wait at the plane. I'll come in the morning."

"In the morning? We have to go home!"

"This is my only chance to see my mother," said Toute.

"Can we come in and use the bathroom?" Bug asked.

"No!" Toute whispered. "You'll ruin everything. Besides, boys can pee in the bushes."

She shut the door.

"What if I don't just have to pee?" Bug grumbled.

They rode back to the old race track, avoiding streets that might be busy, even though few streets in their town were busy after dark. *This isn't our town*, Troy kept reminding himself; *not really. What if we got stopped by a cop? How would we explain who we are?*

They left their bikes in the weeds and entered the track through the tunnel. It was easy without the chain-link fence. The tunnel was darker and scarier than ever at night, but they knew the way and hurried through, without a word.

Troy felt a moment's fear — what if the plane was gone? How would they ever get back home?

But there it was, right where they had left it, shining in the moonlight.

"What if it rains?" Bug asked. "Look at those clouds."

Troy looked up. He had only thought it was moonlight. There was no Moon, but the clouds high overhead were bright. It was as if they were lighted from the ground. *Even the clouds here are weird*, he thought.

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"We'll sleep in the plane," he said. The plane was the only thing that seemed normal, unchanged. The fabric on the right wing was torn where the wingtip had hit the track. The fan in the front was still. Troy spun it with his hand; it spun, then stopped.

They entered the back, through the old outhouse. It still stank, a little. "You can't use this outhouse," Troy said.

"Huh?"

"Didn't you say you needed to — you know?"

"I didn't say I needed to. I said, what if I needed to."

The inside of the aeroplane was just as they had left it. Troy was relieved. The vacuum tubes were cold. The sand in the ashtray was dry.

Bug threw his backpack onto the floor. "I'm hungry," he said.

"Look." Troy unwrapped the greasy napkin Toute had given him. There were two drumsticks inside. They each had one and threw the bones outside, through the side window.

"I'm still hungry," said Bug. "Aren't there any Pop-Tarts left?"

"There's this one." Troy found the third of a Pop-Tart he had left on the shelf by the radio. They shared it sitting on the floor of the plane.

"I wish we had something to drink."

"Well, we don't."

"I'm cold," said Bug.

"It's not cold," said Troy.

They tried using Bug's backpack for a pillow but it was too small for both their heads. Bug took out his glove; it just fit the back of his head. Troy used the backpack. It was lumpy, even empty.

"Why is everything so weird?" Bug asked. They lay side by side, looking up at the plywood ceiling. "If that's my twin, does that mean I'm dead and he's alive?"

"Don't think about it," said Troy.

"What about your mother?"

"Don't think about it," said Troy. It was funny. It had always been his job to make things interesting, but now he felt it was his job to make things as normal as possible. "Just go to sleep. Let's don't talk about it. In the morning maybe it will all look different."

He didn't believe it, but he felt that he had to say it.

* * *

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6. good-bye! good-bye!

MORNING. Troy woke up wondering where he was, but only for a moment. The plywood ceiling of the plane brought it all back.

He sat up. Where was Bug? Troy was all alone in the plane. But someone was outside, tapping on the windshield.

"Who's there?"

He stood up and saw Bug, outside, sitting on his bike.

"Bug?"

"Who's Bug? Is he the one who stole my bike?"

Troy got it. "Wait a minute," he said. He climbed out the side window. The boy on the bike — Bug's bike — looked exactly like Bug, but Troy knew it wasn't Bug. He was wearing an X-TREME T-shirt.

"He didn't steal it," Troy said. "He just borrowed it."

"I found it out in the weeds. You guys are in big trouble. My dad's a cop."

"So is Bug's."

"So what? Who is this Bug and who are you, anyway, and what is this, some kind of airplane?"

"Aeroplane," said Troy. He introduced himself. He held out his hand for a handshake, but Bug's twin acted like he didn't see it.

"I'm Travis Michael Biggs," he said, "and my father's a policeman, and you are in big trouble if you think you can just steal my bike."

"I told you, we just borrowed your bike," said Troy. "And I can explain."

But where to begin? He was wondering how much he should tell this different, more assertive, and slightly obnoxious Bug, when the real Bug came around the side of the plane, carrying a string of tiny fish.

"Bluegills!" Bug said "We can build a fire and...."

Then he saw his twin.

"Whoa," he said. "It's me. I mean, you."

"Whoa," said the twin. "Who in the hell are you?"

"I'll find us some firewood," said Troy, "and let you two sort it out."

When Troy got back with enough wood to build a fire, the two were cleaning fish, as if they had known each other all their lives.

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"My Dad's a cop, too," said Bug. "His name is Travis."

"That's my dad, too," said Travis. "I'm named after him. This is just too weird. You mean there's another town just like this one?"

"Almost," Bug said. "Do you play baseball? What position?"

"First base."

"I'm a pitcher," said Bug. "Sometimes. Sometimes a catcher, too. What's your coach's name?"

"Blaine," said Travis. "He's a jerk."

"Same guy," said Bug. "I'm afraid he won't let me pitch next week because I missed practice."

"No-excuses Blaine," said Travis. "Same guy. But maybe flying in an airplane is a good excuse."

"*Aero*plane," said Troy. "And no grownups must know about this. They would go nuts. We have to get back before they find out about any of this."

"So, it actually flies?"

"It does. Do you have a match?"

Once the fire was going, they cooked the tiny filets on sticks. Each boy got half a fish. Cooked down, they were no bigger than candy bars.

"They need salt," said Bug.

"You're not supposed to eat them anyway," said Travis. "I just catch them and throw them back."

"So do we," said Bug. "But I was starving. Still am."

"Have some Pop-Tarts then."

They all looked around. It was Toute. She was reaching into her backpack. "I only brought three, but I already ate breakfast."

"Me too," said Travis, unwrapping the Pop-Tart she gave him. "But I'll have some more."

Toute seemed to notice him for the first time. "And who in the world are you?" She frowned. "Isn't one Bug enough?"

Bug explained, and Troy told what he had seen at his parents' house. Toute nodded as if she understood. *And maybe she does*, Troy thought. Weird was beginning to seem normal.

"How did you get here anyway?" he asked.

Toute grinned and pointed to a bike lying on the track in front of the plane. It was a pink and white girl's bike Troy had never seen before.

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"You can't ride a bike," Bug pointed out.

"I can here. Plus, I have a mother, plus — " Toute's grin was almost too wide for her narrow face. "I can walk! I'm not bent. Not so bent, anyway."

She walked in a little circle, just like the night before. She still limped, and dragged one foot, but it was true: she could walk.

"That's great," said Troy. "But we've got to get out of here." He climbed back into the airplane. Toute followed, limping in through the tail.

The tubes were cold. Toute dragged her fingers through the sand in the ashtray. "It's dry," she said. "Plus one of the wingtips is broken."

"The fabric ripped when we landed," said Troy. "Maybe it'll still fly, though."

"Better to fix it," said Toute.

Troy followed her out the back of the plane. She limped to the wingtip, reaching into her backpack as she walked. Troy watched, amazed. She had never been able to do either before.

She pulled out a tube of glue.

"Girls are always prepared," she said. Troy held the fabric tight while she glued it to the wood.

"Good going," he said. "But we still need Lectro. Do you have any left?"

"You saw me shake out the last drops," Toute said. She put the glue away and pointed toward the two brothers, who were sitting on the ground examining a ball glove. "I guess it's up to the Bugsy twins."

They followed Bug down into the tunnel. There were only two soda machines, not three, but nobody except Troy seemed to notice, and he didn't point it out. Things were weird enough as it was.

First Bug hit the bottom of the machine, which should have made the light come on. But it didn't. Then he slammed his fist into the center of the machine, which should have dropped a coin into the coin return. But it didn't.

"You're not doing it right, Clarence," said Travis.

"It's Bug."

"Bug, then. Watch."

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Travis kicked the machine on the side and the light came on. Then he slapped the big L above the coin return, and a coin dropped down.

"Let me see that," said Troy.

Travis tossed him the coin.

"There's no hole in it!"

"Of course there's no hole in it," said Travis. "It's real money. Gimme."

Troy tossed it back, and Travis dropped it into the slot and pressed a square button.

A bottle fell with a *thump*.

"It's not Lectro!" said Bug.

"What's Lectro?" Travis opened the bottle and took a swig. "It's Collie Cola — gooder than good." He held out the bottle. "It's warm, though. Here, we can share."

Troy grabbed it. "No way. That's our ticket home. If it works."

"It'll work," said Toute, grabbing it from Troy. "It's like everything else here, the same only different."

Troy climbed into the plane and Toute handed him the bottle of Collie Cola through the side window. He poured a thin stream of brown liquid into the sand.

Nothing happened.

"More," said Toute.

He poured in half the bottle.

"Now stir it."

Troy stirred the damp sand with his fingertips. The tubes started to glow.

"See? It's working," Toute said. She touched the fan and it started to spin — slowly at first, then faster.

"Come on, get in, you guys!" Troy said.

"This thing actually flies?" asked Travis.

"That's the idea," said Troy. "Come on, Bug, Toute. Get in. Let's go."

Bug was standing beside his twin on the clay race track. Except for their T-shirts, they looked even more alike than ever.

They both looked confused. They both spoke at the same time:

"I wish you would come. It would be cool to have a twin brother."

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"I wish you would stay. It would be cool to have a twin brother."

Troy and Toute both laughed. Bug and Travis didn't.

"What I mean is, you could come too," said Bug.

"No way!" said Troy. "We don't know if this thing will even fly again with this stuff. How do we know it will carry four?"

"You could stay here, then," said Travis.

"What about my mom and dad?"

"Same problem here," said Travis.

"Maybe we should switch for a day. But wait, I'm supposed to pitch on Sunday."

"Not if you miss practice," said Travis. "No excuses!"

"Forget switching," said Troy, pouring another inch of Collie Cola into the sand. The fan was turning faster and faster. "There's no way to know we could ever find this place again."

The wheels creaked; the floor lurched under Troy's feet — the plane was starting to move.

"Whoa!" Bug scrambled in through the side window, and Travis passed him his backpack.

Then Travis took off his X-TREME T-shirt and tossed it to Bug. "Swap," he said. Bug took off his GO AHEAD, HAVE A COW T-shirt and tossed it to Travis.

"What is this, a strip tease?" said Toute.

"If you ever want a brother, just look in the mirror," said Travis.

"Cool," said Bug. "I will."

"Come on, Toute!" said Troy. The plane was starting to roll slowly down the track. The wingtips were bobbing up and down.

Toute walked alongside, shaking her head. "I don't think so."

"What!?"

"I'm staying here," she said, picking up her bike.

"You can't stay here! You don't belong here. This is not our real town."

"Yes, it is. It's just as real. And here I can ride a bike."

As if to prove it, she got on and started pedaling alongside the plane.

"Toute, no!" Troy pleaded. The plane was going faster and faster. "If you stay here, what about me? I'll never see you again. I can't come back to get you. I'll get in trouble. They'll say I left you here."

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"Left me where? Nobody knows where I am. They probably think I'm at the mall. Nobody knows I'm with you."

"What about your dad?"

"He'll get over it. Plus I have a mother here, remember? And my dad is here."

"Not the same dad."

"Pretty much the same."

"You can't do this!"

"Why not!"

"Because — " Troy could think of a hundred reasons: Because you are part of me. Because we are like brother and sister. Because I love you. But none he could say. "Because you just can't!"

"I have to," said Toute. "I can walk here and ride a bike. Back home, it's just getting worse and worse. I can hear them whispering all the time."

"Don't!" The plane was picking up speed, lumbering toward the first turn.

"Steer, Troy!" said Bug. "We'll hit the wall."

"I will miss you," Toute said, pedaling faster and faster. "You are my best friend. But hey, maybe there's a you here."

"There isn't! There's not!"

"If there is I'll find him. But you have to steer, Troy, look out!"

The left wingtip was scraping the weeds at the side of the track.

Troy turned the knob to the right, and the plane angled into the first turn, still picking up speed.

"Good luck!" said Travis, catching up on his bicycle. "Good luck in the game."

The floor stopped bouncing. The plane began to rise off the ground.

Toute was pedaling faster and faster. Troy was impressed. But she was falling behind —

"What do I tell your dad?"

"Nothing," said Toute, out of breath. "I've already told him. Goodbye, Troy. I'll never forget you, ever, even if I do find another you. And thanks."

"Thanks?"

"For discovering the aeroplane!"

"Bye, Travis!" Bug yelled. "Bye, Toute." They were rising off the

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track, leaving Travis and Toute behind. When they circled back around, higher and higher, they could see them, standing in the center of the track by their bicycles, looking up and waving.

Then the plane made a broad circle out over the town, and they were left behind, too small to see.

7. flying home

TROY REMEMBERED that flying in he had followed a line from the courthouse to the race track. So he left the same way, flying between the steeple and the water tower, past the clockless courthouse, straight over the town.

They left the streets and trees behind, then the fields. Soon they were flying over trackless dunes again.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Bug asked.

"Sure," said Troy. He wasn't. And Bug knew he wasn't. They both just wanted to hear him say he was. So he said it again. "Sure I'm sure."

The desert was just sand with an occasional stretch of bare rock, scarred as if by huge claws. The tubes glowed, the fan whirred silently, and the plane flew along at a slow, steady pace, not much faster than a bicycle.

"We should have brought some Pop-Tarts," said Bug. "What if we crash? We'll starve."

"You don't starve when you crash," said Troy. "You just crash. It sort of ends everything."

Troy kept the notch straight up. He was pretty sure this was the way home. But what if the wind blew him off course?

There seemed to be a wind. Below, he could see little puffs of sand along the tops of the dunes. And the occasional bush, in a hollow between two dunes, was shaking as if angry.

And there was a yellow wall of clouds dead ahead.

"It's a storm," said Bug.

"Sand storm," said Troy. As if calling it by its right name would make it any better.

"Can we go around it?"

Troy shook his head. "I'll lose my bearings. "

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He kept the notch straight up; they flew straight into the storm. It was all around them, blowing not water and rain but gritty yellow sand. The plane was rocking from side to side. Bug was holding onto the bottom of the window, trying to keep his balance.

He gave up and sat on the floor. "I think we're going to crash," he said. "I still wish we had some Pop-Tarts. What if we survive?"

"Shut up," said Troy. He could barely see out of the windshield. It seemed that the plane was going slower. The wingtips were shaking slowly, up and down. The fabric was rippling, though Toute's repair seemed to be holding.

Then he couldn't see the wingtips anymore. He couldn't see the fan. Everything was yellow, yellow sand. The tubes were looking dim, or was that his imagination? He looked at the Collie Cola bottle. There was less than half a bottle left. A lot less.

Suddenly there was a break in the yellow cloud, and Troy saw white rocks, dead ahead. Was it a mountain, or were they going down? He poured the rest of the brown liquid into the ashtray.

The tubes glowed more brightly, and the front of the plane picked up. The right wing dropped, and the rocks were gone.

"We're turning," said Bug.

Troy wished he would shut up. Bug was becoming the bearer of bad news. "I know."

There didn't seem to be any point in standing at the controls, since the plane did what it wanted to do anyway. And it was hard to breathe. Troy had sand in his eyes, and it gritted between his teeth.

Bug was on the floor, looking like a bandit, with the collar of Travis's X-Treme T-shirt pulled up over his nose. Troy sat on the floor beside him, and covered his nose with his own T-shirt, which didn't say anything. He could breathe but he could hardly see.

There was nothing to see anyway. He closed his eyes. The plane circled higher and higher, shaking, creaking and groaning, through the storm.

Then all was still.

Troy opened his eyes. Bug was asleep. The sand was gone, except for the grit in his eyes and on the floor and between his teeth.

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He wiped his eyes and stood up.

They were still circling, in calm cold air. The stars shone high overhead like little chips of ice. "I'm cold," said Bug, waking up. He joined Troy at the controls.

The sandstorm was like a yellow smudge far below. It was still daylight down there. For some reason, Troy found this encouraging.

He tried the knob, left, then right. The plane dipped its wings, left, then right. Troy centered the knob and it straightened out. They were flying straight again — but straight to where?

Then Bug, the bearer of bad news, brought some good news. "Look!"

Far off to the left, there was a dark spot on the horizon. *Our town?* Troy wondered.

There was only one way to find out. Turning the knob to the left, he headed the plane toward it.

"Think that's our town?" Bug asked.

"For sure," Troy lied.

The boys held their breath, waiting and watching.

Hoping.

The plane was descending.

The smudge on the horizon grew into a blur of trees and streets and houses, looking more and more familiar. There was the courthouse, and the water tower, and the church steeple.

Still descending, the plane flew past the courthouse. Both Troy and Bug were relieved to see that it had a clock.

It was 1:37.

"I can still make it to baseball," Bug said.

"A day late," Troy reminded him. As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't.

"Maybe Blaine won't notice," he added lamely.

There were a few people on the street, but they didn't look up as the plane flew over. *If they did, what would they see?* Troy wondered. The wings, white, with ads for bread and candy, cars and cola. The fuselage, a long square plywood tube, open on one side. Wire wheels spinning slowly in the onrushing air. A V tail, slightly cockeyed, and the propeller, a ceiling fan, turning slower and slower as they descended.

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"There's your house, Toute," said Troy. Then he remembered that she was no longer with them.

"Look at all those cars," said Bug.

Toute's driveway and the street in front of her house were packed with parked cars.

Troy saw what looked like his father's car — not the little sportscar, but the big white Olds. He looked down at the crowd of people at the door, trying to see if his parents were among them. It was hard to tell. They were all dressed alike, in suits and ties.

"Hey! Pay attention," said Bug.

Troy looked out the front. The plane was too low. It was not going to make it over the last row of trees before the old race track.

Troy turned the dial to the left, and then to the right, banking the plane between two trees. He leveled off with the stands dead ahead. With the last drop of Collie Cola, he brought the nose up, barely missing the top row of seats.

"We're going to hit the lake," Bug said. "And drown."

"It's not deep enough," said Troy. "Shut up and fasten your seat belt."

He spun the dial and dropped the left wing. The wingtip scraped the track and the plane landed sideways, skidding, teetering first on one wheel, and then on the other.

CRUNCH!

Everything was dark. *It's always dark like this down among the roots*, Troy thought, *where the Teeny-Weenies live. It's okay, though. Toute knows the way.* "Let's go back up," he said to her. "It's too dark."

"You go on," she said.

"I don't know the way."

"Sure you do."

"Come on!" said Bug.

Huh?

It was light. Bug was dragging him out of the back of the plane.

"Hey! You're getting splinters in my butt!"

"You crashed us!" Bug said. "It's going to burn!"

"Let go of me! It's not full of gas, it runs on water and sand. How can it burn?"

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"I guess you know everything," said Bug, dropping him. "I was trying to save your life."

"Sorry. Thanks." Troy stood up, his feet slipping. The track was muddy. The ground felt funny, after the air.

The plane was a mess. One wing had come off and landed in the mud along the infield, where it looked like a fallen fence.

The other was still attached to the fuselage, which was half in and half out of the infield. The tail was tipped over, like a fallen outhouse.

"Looks like there's been a storm here, too," said Troy. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, but I'm late." Bug was already heading for the tunnel, his backpack over his shoulder.

Troy followed him across the track and into the tunnel. They splashed through water at the bottom. The drink machines were dark, like sentinels. There were three of them. Outside, the hole under the chain link fence was filled with water from the storm.

They climbed over instead of under.

Their bikes gleamed in the weeds, looking like they had just been washed. Bug got on his Blizzard and bounced the wheels, as if making sure it was real. "I can still make practice if I hurry."

"Go, then."

"What are you going to tell them about Toute?"

"I don't know. I'll think of something."

But the fact was, it was hard to think of anything. The place where Toute had been was like a hole in Troy's thoughts as he rode toward home. Her memory was like a dark patch he couldn't look into — but couldn't look away from, either.

"Where have you been!" Troy's father demanded, when he opened the door. Troy couldn't look at him; he kept remembering the little mustache. He looked away.

"It's okay." His father squeezed his shoulder in that way that fathers do. "I know you are upset. Your mother is over at William's house now. I was there all day."

William was Troy's dad's brother, Toute's father.

"Toute — " Troy began.

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"Toute died peacefully in her sleep," said Troy's father. "William was waiting for it. He was prepared. She was prepared, too. She knew for a week, he said. I'm surprised she hadn't said anything to you. You two are so close. Were so close. Anyway, get dressed. Your mother is already there, and we are expected for the memorial. She laid your suit and tie out on your bed. Get dressed and I'll help you tie your tie."

8: almost home

TROY HARDLY RECOGNIZED Toute at the funeral, she looked so still and so straightened out. He tried to cry because everyone else was crying, but he couldn't. So he just sat with his eyes almost closed. It was like getting through a sandstorm.

In the days that followed he missed her, but he knew where she was. He even knew what it was like there, and what she was doing: riding her bike. Eating fried chicken.

Troy was in far less trouble than he had expected. He was surprised to find that his parents thought he had spent the night with Bug. Nor was Bug in trouble, either. He told his parents he had spent the night with Troy after they had been caught in the storm. Luckily, the phone lines had been down all night.

It was several days before the two boys met at the usual tree and rode to the old race track on the outskirts of town. The drink machines still lurked like monsters in the tunnel, but when Bug kicked the center one, no light came on.

"The rain must have ruined it," Bug said. He was wearing the X-TREME T-shirt. No one had noticed, he said.

Troy wasn't surprised. "Grownups never really read T-shirts," he said.

The aeroplane was in pieces on the track and in the infield. The track was still muddy in spots.

One good effect of the storm: the scum was almost all gone from the lake. *We may have to change the name*, Troy thought. It wasn't Scum Lake anymore.

While Bug went to get worms, Troy lay face down on the end of the

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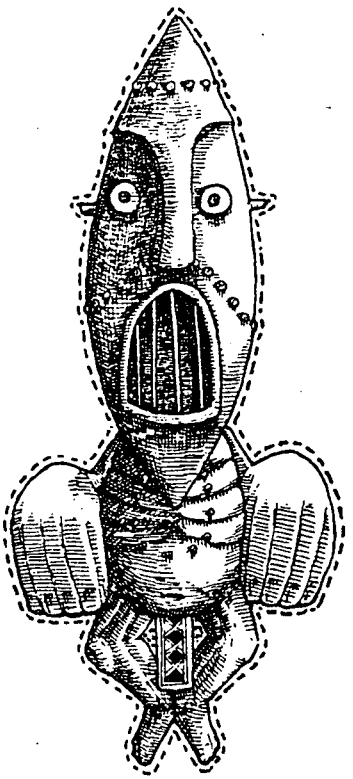
dock. He could see all the way to the bottom. There was a concrete block, and a tire. Then, as he watched, a great blunt shape swam out of the shadows and stopped, right under him.

He started to call Bug, but didn't. It was better to be silent and watch. He wished Toute were there to see it. She would have liked it. She had always liked it when weird things got real. ☙

ZEN VOODOO



1.) CUT ALONG DOTTED LINES.
2.) STEAL HAIR FROM YOUR ENEMY AND AFFIX IT TO THE FETISH'S HEAD.
3.) STEAL NAIL PARINGS FROM YOUR ENEMY AND AFFIX THEM TO THE FETISH'S FINGERS.
4.) AFFIX THE FETISH TO YOUR ENEMY'S CHEST WITH A STEAK KNIFE.

Wong

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CURIOSITIES

IN A LAND OF CLEAR COLORS, BY ROBERT SHECKLEY (1979)

ONCE UPON a time, dear reader, multimedia meant a book with pictures and a long-playing vinyl record to pop on your turntable and listen to as you turn the pages in a synaesthetic trance. One example, at least, of this vanished art form is worth remembering in these digital daydream times. The multimedia album of *In a Land of Clear Colors* features an exotic and humorous novella of interplanetary exploration by Robert Sheckley, illustrated by Leonor Quiles; the lp is narrated by Peter Sinfield in rich, expressive tones, and interspersed with atmospheric musical compositions by Brian Eno. It is a beautiful, large-format book.

Sheckley's unlikely hero, Goldstein, was one of the first idealists "to go E.T." The tale is a journal of his experiences on the alien planet of Kaldor V. Sheckley deftly balances a comedy of intercultural misunderstandings against a genuinely moving tale of a man who finds the world changing in ways he can never quite grasp. From an urban, technological culture, the Kaldorians pass through a phase of sensual excess, then abruptly become a nomadic primitive tribe. There are numerous portents whose meaning Goldstein is unable to anticipate; only when Kaldorian society has undergone one further, almost inconceivable change does he piece together what has happened.

Sheckley has written other satirical stories on "the exploration of space," including "Shall We Have a Little Talk?" and "Aspects of Langranak" (decidedly anti-heroic), and the more recent, whimsical "Emissary from a Green and Yellow World" (*F&SF*, Oct./Nov. 1998). *In a Land of Clear Colors* is memorable and worth looking for.

—Henry Wessells

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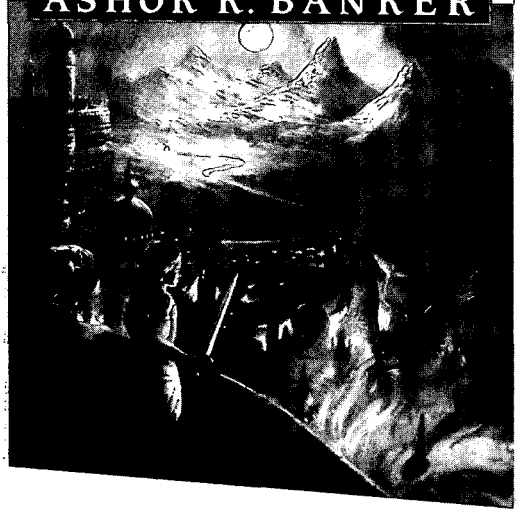

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